

## Spring Again

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# Spring Again

by [Saori](#)

## Summary

Long weeks after the events of Guanyin Temple, Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling can finally go back to their old life, with their newly formed bonds. Or so, they think, until one night Lan JingYi decides to have a little fun with the visiting Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui. Although his definition of fun needs improving, if it means breaking into the Room of Forbidden Books, stealing a volume and play unidentified music from it. This might've gone unnoticed by their seniors at that night, but the next day, they realize it might *not* have gone without consequences.

Lan XiChen had come out of seclusion and doesn't remember Lan SiZhui, nor Lan JingYi. Lan WangJi is cold and distant, more so than what they're used to. Wei WuXian isn't traveling anymore, gets along with Jiang Cheng and never heard of the GusuLan principles before. Jin Ling wakes miles away and his sword is carried by an unknown pretentious Young Master Jin.

Then they realize Lan XiChen is not their Sect Leader, Lan WangJi is not their teacher, Wei WuXian isn't the undead YiLing Patriarch. Not *yet* anyways.

What have they done?! Where, or more accurately, when are they?!

## Notes

Condensed fic notes, for further info please see the [APPENDIX](#):

- This fic is based on *The Untamed* with all the drama's flaws/plot holes inherited from it. This includes them not changing actors for WWX/MXY and not masking the actors to make up for age differences, etc. (a wig change doesn't count)
- In this world/culture deception is not common, therefore there's no reason for someone to mistrust a stranger's word unless it is forementioned they're not trustworthy.
- There will be a lot of random people named in the fic. You only need to keep in mind those who have their name meanings in the notes. Name meanings will be in the chapter notes of the chapter the character first shows up, later on you can find them in the [APPENDIX](#).
- I'm not an encyclopedia of canon facts, and also this is my own story, so I took liberties with canon.
- I don't own any of the original materials this work is based on.

**We have an appendix now. If you're ever confused about something, you'll most likely find it here. Ages, name meanings, timeline. Contains spoilers!!**

**[APPENDIX LINK](#)**

**Please note that this fic has 57 chapters, the two last ones are the appendix and a thank you note.**

Please, **DO NOT** repost anywhere; translate without permission; make podfic without permission; upload it into a database (such as Goodreads, etc.)

Hope you enjoy reading this fic as much as I enjoyed writing it!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

# Guilt I.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The day started out as normal, despite knots tightening Lan SiZhui's stomach. He was so preoccupied, he hardly registered going to his morning classes. He was trying to keep his head low, even though there was no way Hanguang-Jun knew about what they were up to the previous night. He still felt incredibly guilty. He was the first disciple of the GusuLan Sect, a prime example. For him to go around, breaking rules as he did last night, it was a great shame.

He skipped lunch, too anxious to eat. He was walking to meditation with Lan JingYi, and he was quieter than usual, more reserved. It did not escape Lan JingYi's notice either.

"Why are you so nervous today?"

"Have you seen Hanguang-Jun today?" Lan SiZhui deflected the question.

"No." Lan JingYi shrugged. "I'm sure he's occupied. Maybe he's with Jin Ling."

"What makes you say that?"

"I haven't seen him today either and he did say they had something or another to discuss. Sect Leader stuff, he said I wouldn't understand." He rolled his eyes. "Hey, since we're talking about this, I haven't seen Lan LuoHan nor Su XiZhen today either, nor the others." He made a face as he looked around.

Lan SiZhui blinked, the same thing occurring to him just then. He hadn't seen any familiar faces today either. He was so preoccupied in the morning; he didn't notice earlier. Looking around himself, he noticed a familiar figure not far away and his eyes widened.

"Lan JingYi!" He pulled on the other's robes, and his friend made a face at him for it.

"What?"

"Isn't that ZeWu-Jun?"

"ZeWu-Jun is in seclusion." Lan JingYi rolled his eyes but looked where Lan SiZhui was pointing nonetheless. His eyes widened as well. "Should we... Should we approach him?" ZeWu-Jun was walking down a path alone, a common sight usually, but in the light of recent events, it was quite strange.

"I don't want to disturb him, but if he's walking around, surely he's not avoiding getting seen." He thought out loud and Lan JingYi nodded, deciding for them.

"Let's go." He turned and together, they walked over. They didn't run but it was a near thing. As ZeWu-Jun noticed them, he raised curious eyebrows, the usual gentle up-tilt of his lips in

place. He was wearing pale blue robes and he had Liebing in one hand, the other behind his back, Shuoyue secured on his belt. He stopped as the teens stepped in front of him and bowed deeply.

“ZeWu-Jun.” They chorused before straightening up. ZeWu-Jun had a confused but kind expression on his face.

“ZeWu-Jun, excuse us for the disturbance.” Lan SiZhui said nervously, not sure what to say. He wanted to ask if he was coming out of seclusion or just visited his brother but it felt too personal, especially with Lan JingYi here.

“ZeWu-Jun, have you come out of seclusion?” Apparently, Lan JingYi didn’t have such worries. Lan SiZhui would’ve glared at him for the bluntness if he wasn’t busy looking at ZeWu-Jun, eager for the answer as well.

“Seclusion?” ZeWu-Jun’s confused expression now took over his whole face, leaving very little room for his usual amusement.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, please excuse Lan JingYi for his forwardness.” Lan SiZhui bowed and Lan JingYi pouted.

“I’m sorry, Lan JingYi?” He looked at the boy and Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged a look.

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun?” Lan JingYi asked back confused. For a moment, there was only awkward silence, then ZeWu-Jun shook his head with his lips pressed together.

“Forgive me, surely the lectures keep me preoccupied.” Lectures? Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared another look, this one worried.

“ZeWu-Jun... What lectures do you mean?” Lan SiZhui asked carefully.

“Of course, the GusuLan lectures for the other Sects’ disciples.” ZeWu-Jun said slowly. “Boys, is everything alright?”

“Are you, ZeWu-Jun?” Lan JingYi asked with great concern.

“I’m fine.” He nodded. “Did you forget about the lectures starting soon? The disciples should start arriving today.”

“Uh...” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi looked at each other in confusion. Was ZeWu-Jun talking nonsense, or did they miss something while they were away? But Lan JingYi came back to the Cloud Recesses after the events of Guanyin Temple, and he seemed just as confused as Lan SiZhui, who spent a few weeks with his cousin, away.

“Are you two sure everything is alright?” ZeWu-Jun asked after they haven’t answered for a while and Lan SiZhui was quick to reply.

“Of course, ZeWu-Jun. Please excuse us, the past events have been overwhelming and we haven’t been paying proper attention to the happenings in the Cloud Recesses.”

“Past events?” ZeWu-Jun’s expression was, again, overly confused. Noting they shouldn’t poke at the past, Lan SiZhui was quick to apologize.

“I apologize for the intrusion, ZeWu-Jun. We should be going to meditate now.” He shared a look with Lan JingYi, making sure they were on the same page, then they bowed and after a nod of acknowledgement from ZeWu-Jun, they hurried away.

“That was weird.” Lan JingYi said once they were far enough away.

“After meditation, we should go, find Hanguang-Jun, ask him about it.” Lan SiZhui agreed.

Hours later they still couldn’t find Hanguang-Jun. They’ve almost ran into Lan QiRen and ZeWu-Jun twice, but they managed to dodge them. They did not want to have another confusing and weird conversation with ZeWu-Jun, and they feared Lan QiRen with good reason.

Afternoon came and went. It was late when they heard people saying Lan WangJi brought back a dead body, a familial disciple who went missing earlier. Hearing that, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui immediately wanted to go and talk to him, but something always seemed to keep them busy.

First, it was a brother who asked their help repairing a roof. It was strange, because Lan SiZhui didn’t remember that roof having so much water damage. After the Wen Sect burned most of the Cloud Recesses to the ground, everything had been rebuilt the same way it used to be, but for some reason, now it even looked as old as the pre-fire buildings were told to be like.

After that, they had dinner, then curfew. During dinner they were jittery, ready to talk to Hanguang-Jun, but then another brother needed help with some scrolls and Lan SiZhui couldn’t turn him down. They spent the time between dinner and curfew helping out.

“We’ve missed our chance to talk to Hanguang-Jun.” Lan JingYi said as they were walking back to their sleeping quarters. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“We should seek him out first thing in the morning.”

“That’s so far away!” Lan JingYi complained. “What if something’s seriously wrong with ZeWu-Jun?”

“We couldn’t have been the only ones to notice. If him and Hanguang-Jun talked today, he should’ve noticed too. We can wait until morning to voice our concerns.”

“Lan SiZhui, please.” Lan JingYi pleaded, stopping to look at him earnestly. “I’m worried about ZeWu-Jun.” He looked down in a moment of vulnerability. Lan SiZhui empathized, but he didn’t want to break curfew.

“We shouldn’t break more rules.”

“Lan SiZhui, what if something happens to ZeWu-Jun and we could’ve stopped it?” Lan JingYi sounded so small. “I don’t want to break rules either, but I want to ease my mind,

knowing we had at least told Hanguang-Jun about it.”

Lan SiZhui sighed and looked away from his friend, deep in thought. They still had a few minutes until curfew. If they were quick, they could find Hanguang-Jun, explain it to him. Surely, if they started their search before curfew, it could be excused they stayed out after?

“Let’s go to the Jingshi.” He nodded.

“Shouldn’t we go to the Lanshi first?” Lan JingYi asked, looking up. “If it’s true that they brought back a dead body, surely it’s something wicked. Hanguang-Jun would want to consult Grandmaster and ZeWu-Jun about it.”

“Right. But if they brought back a body and need consul, they might be in the Mingshi.”

“You’re right.” Lan JingYi nodded eagerly. “Let’s look for them there!”

And so, they headed out. The Mingshi was a little farther from the main buildings, so they spent some time getting there. The doors were closed and guards were standing in front of it. As soon as they saw the two teens, they tensed up. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui bowed to them.

“Brothers. We’re looking for Second Young Master Lan, is he inside?”

“Second Young Master Lan is not here. And you shouldn’t be either. It is almost curfew. Please, return to your quarters.” The teens nodded to the guard’s words and headed back on the path.

“Should we check the Lanshi next?” Lan JingYi asked and Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“I don’t think we have time...”

“We still do!” Lan JingYi argued. “Please, Lan SiZhui!” Lan SiZhui thought for a moment, counting the minutes they had left and nodded wordlessly.

It was into curfew when they arrived to the main buildings. Lan SiZhui wanted to go back to their rooms and wait until morning, but earlier he agreed to Lan JingYi’s plan and he couldn’t break his word now. They walked between the buildings. It was awfully strange, being out at Cloud Recesses this late – the last time it happened was when Lan SiZhui was still young and living with Hanguang-Jun. They’d sometimes go out to admire the stars.

As they neared the Lanshi, they heard voices and halted, not wanting to interrupt, they decided to wait until they came to a pause. The voices drifted into the night, clear and as loud as if they were standing in the room with them, in the still and silent night of the Cloud Recesses it was easier to make out the words.

“You see? He looks dead... and he feels like he's dead, but he's still affected by the fluctuation of spiritual power. He can't truly be considered dead. He's nothing more than...”

That voice sounded familiar and Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look.

“Than what?” That was ZeWu-Jun!

“It's hard to say. But he seems to have lost his spiritual cognition.” Whoever this person was, he was smart. Although Lan SiZhui was familiar with that description from his History studies. He was fairly sure he would know what the creature was if he could take a look.

“Soul snatch.” Hanguang-Jun! Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared an excited look, then a frown.

“A puppet.” That was Lan QiRen's voice. And that was right! He remembered the description because it was, almost from word to word in the books about the Sunshot Campaign. Lan SiZhui tensed at the mention. Even though he was familial with Wen Ning, who was also considered a puppet in a way, he was special in that he had his own conscience. Others did not, and if one was in the Cloud Recesses...

“Yes! He's like a puppet. A compliant puppet.” The unidentified voice said. “These markings must be the clue as to what this thing actually is. Unfortunately, in my studies I've never met this marking before. If it existed before, it is not common.”

“I'm still confused as to how you could tell at the gate, Young Master Wei.” Wei WuXian?! Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a wide-eyed look of shock. That couldn't be, his voice was not the one they were familiar with – and they were quite familiar with it. They heard it a lot in the past few months.

“Isn't he traveling now?” Lan JingYi asked in a whisper. Lan SiZhui shook his head to signal he did not know. His last knowledge of his former adoptive father was that he'd stayed at the Cloud Recesses for a short while, then left.

“Ah!” The man who called himself Wei WuXian said with a change of mood, more familiar now that they knew who he was. “I used to live in YiLing. ZeWu-Jun surely heard of the nearby Burial Mounds.” Heard of?! Lan JingYi snorted next to him and Lan SiZhui shared the sentiment. “It is said it was a battlefield, but there were simply too many dead. Hundreds, if not thousands of cultivators attempted to cleanse it from the resentful energy that lays there, but not even they were strong enough to succeed. Anyhow, since I've lived there for a short time, and I've visited it a lot during my night-hunts, I've become somewhat familiar with the dark energy. I'm not saying I've dealt with it a lot, but I've come to recognize the signs easily.”

That was even stranger than anything they heard before. Wei WuXian talked about the Burial Mounds like he hadn't lived there for more than a year, like he didn't raise Lan SiZhui there. Like he was never the YiLing Patriarch.

“I see.” ZeWu-Jun sounded skeptical, like he, too, forgot about all the above. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were frowning nonstop now. “WangJi. We shouldn't keep Young Master Wei any longer. Please bring him back to his family now, so they can all rest.” To his family?

“Yes, Lan Zhan, let's go!” That, at least, was familiar. The enthusiasm, the inappropriate addressing of Hanguang-Jun.



Anticipating they'd come out now, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui moved away, so they wouldn't be caught eavesdropping, and went ahead the path so they would definitely run into the two leaving. It took longer than they thought it would, like Senior Wei and Hanguang-Jun stayed for a few more words, then they heard their voices drifting over. They only heard the end tail of their discussion as they rounded the corner before they saw Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui.

"Address me properly." Hanguang-Jun said and that was odd too. He never corrected how Wei WuXian addressed him before.

"So cold!" Senior Wei said with a familiar pout, then they noticed the two disciples standing some distance away. As soon as Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui saw they noticed them, they bowed. Hanguang-Jun walked up to them silently, which wasn't out of the ordinary, but Senior Wei skipped over without a word as well, which was. They hadn't looked up to see what was wrong yet, greeting:

"Hanguang-Jun. Senior Wei. Excuse us for the intrusion."

"Hey! How do you guys know me?" Wei WuXian asked and the boys finally straightened, just to receive yet another shock. Because Senior Wei did not look like Senior Wei. There were similarities, but Wei WuXian in Mo XuanYu's body always looked eerie. Once Lan SiZhui asked Wen Ning about it, who said he did not know for sure, but Hanguang-Jun had a theory that the YiLing Patriarch's soul was so strong it actually showed his old face through Mo XuanYu's.

The result was something ghostly. He never looked solid, yet he did. If one watched him from the corner of their eye, his face was different, youthful with thin lips, sharp nose and soft chin and jawline. If one looked at him properly, he looked similar to what he looked like now.

He had wide eyes and mouth, gently and elegantly curving eyebrows that framed his face handsomely. His hair was strangely bound, with a bun on top secured with a simplistic ornament. And he was in white guest GusuLan robes with a lotus flower embroidered into the shoulders. He looked different than they were used to, more solid, more like...

More like a person, less like a ghost possessing a body. His voice was also different. While similar in tone, it was a bit deeper, a bit richer. Nicer, Lan SiZhui supposed. Wei WuXian in front of them looked like how Lan SiZhui remembered him, if a bit younger still.

Hanguang-Jun, at least, looked almost like himself, if a bit younger as well, his eyes wore less wrinkles and his mouth less sorrow. He always looked sad to Lan SiZhui, growing up. Now he looked like he didn't know what loss was – both of them.

"Are you guys okay?" Wei WuXian leaned in front of them and waved a hand in front of their faces.

"What are you waving at?" Lan JingYi clicked his tongue, annoyed, as he swatted the hand away. "You're in the Cloud Recesses, couldn't you try to behave at least here?" Instead of teasing him back, Wei WuXian seemed... taken aback. Shocked. Hanguang-Jun also furrowed his brows as he looked over at Lan JingYi sharply. Lan JingYi, as usual, just pouted

and looked to the ground in shame. Lan SiZhui, as always, tried to make up for his lack of manners.

“Apologies, Senior Wei, Hanguang-Jun.” He waited for either of his adoptive fathers’ nod or word of acknowledgement, but it never came and suddenly, he was at a loss for words. He was quick to find his footing though. “Hanguang-Jun, we’ve been wanting to talk to you all day. Would this be a good time to go back to the Jingshi for a round of tea and converse?” Hanguang-Jun gave them a strange, searching look at that.

“It is past curfew.” Was all he said.

“We know, Hanguang-Jun, it’s just...” Lan JingYi started, rubbing the back of his neck. “We just wanted to know if ZeWu-Jun was alright.” He looked up earnestly. “Did he come out of seclusion? Is he going back to being Sect Leader?”

“Huh? Sect Leader? Hanguang-Jun?” Senior Wei asked, furrowing his brows and crossing his arms over his chest. Lan SiZhui was still astonished by how solid his face looked, how clear, how recognizable, all features in place, not like they were blending in with another face—

“Why are you carrying your sword?” Lan JingYi suddenly asked, and Lan SiZhui looked first at him in alarm, then at Senior Wei, who was, indeed, clutching Suibian in his hand where it was crossed over his chest. Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as well. Sect Leader Jiang never gave it back to him. It came as a shock to see it now in his hands. He looked down at it, confused, then back at the teens.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He asked with a frown. “It is my sword after all. You carry yours, too.” He nodded towards Lan JingYi’s sword, Zhameng as well. Lan JingYi frowned down at his sword, then at Wei WuXian. Hanguang-Jun blinked slowly, then turned to the teens.

“It is past curfew. You should return to your rooms. You shall be punished for breaking the rules.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared an uneasy look. They were in the wrong, surely, but Hanguang-Jun usually wasn’t this cold when scolding them.

“But Hanguang-Jun, we just wanted to know if ZeWu-Jun was alright!” Lan JingYi protested with a pout.

“XiChen is well. You could’ve asked him.” Hanguang-Jun’s look was sharper than what they were used to.

“Hanguang-Jun, we’ve asked, but he seemed confused. We hoped you could take pity on us and give us a better insight.” Lan SiZhui tried politely with a bow, but Hanguang-Jun looked at him the same he did at Lan JingYi.

“Talking about others behind their back is a violation of the Lan principles.” It was said calmly, but Lan SiZhui had been raised by the man, he knew all his moods. His words were sharp and unforgiving, which took him by surprise. Usually, Hanguang-Jun was willing to bend the rules, and knowing they were worried... he was being quite harsh!

But Lan SiZhui was still a Lan disciple and he should follow the rules, not look at Hanguang-Jun when he broke them, so he bowed with as much respect as he could. Before him and Lan JingYi could apologize, Wei WuXian spoke up.

“Hey! They were just worried about ZeWu-Jun. Stop being so— Mm!” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as he watched Senior Wei trying to talk, silencing spell stopping his mouth from moving. Never had he ever seen Hanguang-Jun put the silencing spell on Wei WuXian before, no matter how annoying he was. Lan SiZhui knew his own patience would’ve snapped a few times, let alone Lan WangJi’s, who was less patient than the teenager, but he never used the spell on the other man.

“Come.” Hanguang-Jun ordered, then turned and walked back towards where they’ve come from with Wei WuXian. The other man was glaring daggers into his back as the three of them followed. Halfway there, Wei WuXian turned to Lan SiZhui, eyes alight with a new idea. He bowed curtly, then pointed at his mouth with a hopeful expression, nodding.

“Ah, Senior Wei, I’m afraid we cannot lift Hanguang-Jun’s silencing spell.” Lan SiZhui said apologetically.

“And we wouldn’t want to either!” Lan JingYi said with a teasing smirk. Wei WuXian didn’t look at him flatly like he would’ve a few weeks ago, but sharply, offended. That visibly thrown Lan JingYi off as he blinked in confusion. He tried to save it by saying: “Don’t look at me like that! You’re annoying.”

Seeing Hanguang-Jun’s head move the slightest, Lan SiZhui quickly warned: “Lan JingYi, that’s enough.” They shared a look and Lan SiZhui nodded to him when he saw the other understood – Hanguang-Jun was, for some reason, in a very bad mood. They shouldn’t anger him more. Shouldn’t break more rules.

They entered the Lanshi, where ZeWu-Jun and Lan QiRen were preparing a round of tea at the table. Seeing them, they halted, and ZeWu-Jun stood, confused expression on his face as he looked over their party. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi both bowed to the two seniors deeply.

“ZeWu-Jun, Grandmaster.” They greeted in unison before rising. Lan SiZhui was too embarrassed to look up.

“WangJi, what’s going on?” ZeWu-Jun asked, turning to his brother.

“They broke curfew.”

“Mm!”

“WangJi.” ZeWu-Jun gave his brother a look, who then lifted the silence spell.

“Is it gone?” Wei WuXian asked, then let out a relieved sigh. He turned to Hanguang-Jun. “Lan Zhan, you’ve silenced me three times today without reason! How cold!” He pouted.

“Loud.” Hanguang-Jun said coldly.

“Loud?! Am I being too loud, Lan Zhan?” Wei WuXian asked, crossing his arms across his chest. “Why didn’t you say so? I would’ve been quieter then!” He grinned broadly.

“Ridiculous.” Lan WangJi said coldly and Wei WuXian pouted at him.

“Disciples. What are your names?” ZeWu-Jun asked, and Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared another confused look. How did he not remember? Surely, now Hanguang-Jun saw why they were worried about him, but Lan SiZhui’s adoptive father looked just as lost as his brother was regarding their names. Lan SiZhui was the first to collect himself and he stepped forward with a bow.

“My name is Lan Yuan, Lan SiZhui, ZeWu-Jun.”

“My name is Lan Cheng, Lan JingYi, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan JingYi stepped next to him, bowing as well. ZeWu-Jun and Lan QiRen shared a look, then Grandmaster Lan asked:

“Who are your parents?”

“My parents were Lan ChenGuang and Su ZhuoXuan.” Lan JingYi said slowly, confused why they were asked this question.

“Lan ChenGuang?” ZeWu-Jun muttered under his breath; head bowed in thought.

“Where are they now?” Lan QiRen asked Lan JingYi sharply.

“They died on a night-hunt when I was little.” Lan JingYi looked down and Lan SiZhui watched him sadly.

“And you?” Lan QiRen turned to Lan SiZhui, who hesitated, glancing back at Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian.

“Uh, I never knew my birth family, Grandmaster.” He answered shyly.

“I see.” He said, leaning back and looking at them with consideration.

“Don’t you know these brothers?” Wei WuXian asked slowly, with confusion and teasing in his voice. ZeWu-Jun paused at that, looking over at him.

“Young Master Wei.” He said after a moment. “Forgive WangJi for bringing you back here and putting the silencing spell on you again. He wanted to make sure these disciples were properly taken care of and didn’t want to leave you on your own either. Now that they’re here, WangJi can take you back to your family.”

Senior Wei pressed his lips together, nodding, then bowed to ZeWu-Jun before him and Hanguang-Jun left the room without any hesitation or consideration to the teens, who bowed to their backs before turning back to Lan QiRen and ZeWu-Jun.

“Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi. You’re both disciples of the Lan Sect. You know the rules.” ZeWu-Jun sounded tired, so they just nodded, lowering their eyes. “Your punishment should be

ruled out by the Grandmaster.” He turned to Lan QiRen, who studied each boy individually before nodding.

“Copy Righteousness fifteen times doing the handstand.” Fifteen?! Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi looked at each other in shock and fright. The most they had to do had been ten times a section at most, never the whole set fifteen times!

“Uncle?” ZeWu-Jun asked, just as confused.

“If they are true disciples of the GusuLan Sect, they should be able to do it.” To that, ZeWu-Jun kept quiet. Their fate had been decided. They both swallowed deeply before turning back to Lan QiRen and bowing.

“Go back to your rooms and rest.” ZeWu-Jun told them and they bowed again in parting. Once they were out of what they hoped was the two seniors’ hearing range, Lan JingYi exclaimed:

“What the fu—”

“Lan JingYi!” Lan SiZhui glared at him and Lan JingYi swallowed his words.

“What was that? They acted like they didn’t know us. Were their memories wiped or something?” He looked at Lan SiZhui with wide, scared eyes. He shook his head, not ready to theorize yet.

“Could this be related to what you and Jin Ling were up to last night? We haven’t seen him all day either.”

“I mean, how could it?” Lan JingYi frowned. “We just played some music. It’s not like we cast a spell!”

“The sheets were from the Room of Forbidden Books. How do you know they weren’t malicious?” He asked kindly but carefully.

“But we didn’t use any spiritual energy!” Lan JingYi protested. “Even if they were, they shouldn’t have activated. And they weren’t.”

“How are you so sure?”

“I...” Lan JingYi hesitated, then at Lan SiZhui’s look, he swallowed. “It wasn’t the first time I played them, alright?” He looked away in embarrassment.

“Lan JingYi!”

“I didn’t mean to! I mean I did, but not because I went poking my nose into it. I was assigned to the library and I got bored and...”

“I knew we shouldn’t have played them.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, lump in his throat from fear.

“I’m sorry.” Lan JingYi said in a small voice. Looking over him Lan SiZhui sighed, shaking his head.

“Apologies won’t bring back their memories. Tomorrow we should go and tell ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun and Grandmaster what we did. They can surely help.”

“Lan SiZhui, if we tell the seniors what we did, they will throw us out.” Lan JingYi answered in a panicked voice. “We cannot let them know!”

“It is out of our expertise, Lan JingYi.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “Remember what Hanguang-Jun always tells us before night-hunts. *‘Know your limits, don’t hesitate to ask for help.’*”

“But if we ask for help on a night-hunt, we’re not being punished for it.”

“This isn’t about punishment anymore, Lan JingYi. We cannot play like this. We committed a serious crime last night.”

“I know, and I’m sorry I got you into this, but if ZeWu-Jun finds out, I’ll surely be cast out of the Sect.” Lan JingYi’s eyes were full of unshed tears. “Can’t we just try to find a solution ourselves first, before my cultivation career is over?”

“Lan JingYi, breaking more rules won’t help our situation.” Lan SiZhui felt bad for the other boy, of course he did. And if it came to it, he’d stand by his side and take the same amount of blame, no matter that Lan JingYi dragged him into it or if he went willingly – he wouldn’t leave him to suffer alone. But he still didn’t believe it was the right thing to do.

“I didn’t mean this to happen.” Lan JingYi said, possibly the quietest and saddest Lan SiZhui heard him since they were eight and he decided to befriend the boy who just lost his parents in a tragic accident. Sadly, he reached over as he saw Senior Wei do often, and squeezed Lan JingYi’s shoulder. When the other looked up, he smiled at him, and Lan JingYi hesitantly returned it.

“ZeWu-Jun will see how much you’ve regretted your action.”

“I won’t even see the gates closing behind me I’ll be thrown out so fast. Please, Lan SiZhui. Just give me a chance to fix it before we tell ZeWu-Jun, if we can’t find a solution, I swear I’ll go to him myself and he needn’t to dirty his boots escorting me off the mountain, I’ll go as fast as I can.”

Lan SiZhui felt the beginnings of a headache forming. He didn’t want to break more rules, didn’t want to deal with something this serious by himself. But he couldn’t let Lan JingYi down, he just couldn’t. He made a promise when they were eight years old and he couldn’t break his word. He couldn’t turn his back on his brother.

“One day. If we cannot figure this out by tomorrow, we will go to ZeWu-Jun first thing.”

“Yes!” Lan JingYi fell on his knees and Lan SiZhui reached after him in great alarm. His friend must’ve been more worried than he thought. “Thank you, Lan SiZhui, thank you!”

“Get up, come on, get up.” He encouraged softly. “Let’s go get some rest.”

“Thank you.” Lan JingYi looked at him earnestly and Lan SiZhui couldn’t help himself, smiled at him gently.

“We will figure this out.”

“Okay.” Lan JingYi nodded. Lan SiZhui returned it, then after a moment, Lan JingYi shook off his mood and looked around. “We should go before we run into Hanguang-Jun again. He was in a really awful mood earlier.” He frowned and Lan SiZhui agreed.



The next morning their punishment started. It was awful. They were used to do this with one section, but Righteousness contained sixteen different sections, which meant there were only two hundred and fifty rules in each section. To copy them ten times was tiresome, and that equaled to ten sections worth of rules. Written in seal script, even if one knew them by heart, was still difficult to manage.

As they were doing their third section for the first time out of their fifteen, some disciples walked into the library. It was common for a disciple to come in and take a book, but a group of them were quite odd, not to mention their noises.

“So, this is the famous library of the GusuLan Sect.” Wei WuXian! Lan SiZhui wanted to look up, or down in his case, but he was feeling dizzy just by concentrating on the paper in front of him.

“You better remember it well.” Jiang WanYin?! Lan SiZhui turned slightly, just enough to see Lan JingYi do the same. They were both alarmed and worried. The brothers hadn’t interacted since Guanyin Temple, or from what they knew they haven’t. Jin Ling was pretty informed about these things, so they believed him. “Since you’re going to spend so much time here.”

“Must you remind me?” Wei WuXian whined. “That fuddy-duddy has nothing better to do than punish innocent people who were shut out of their stupid mountains.” He pouted.

“Innocent?” The words were typical, but the tone was off. It sounded more teasing than angry, which surprised the two boys enough to look up, but upon almost throwing up at the motion, they both looked back down – or up – again. “I told you not to drink, and you didn’t only cease to listen to me, you brought the drink here!”

“What was I supposed to do?! Drink it in the forest?” Wei WuXian scoffed. “Anyways, I brought you back some, aren’t you supposed to be grateful?”

“What should I be grateful for? It was barely a sip!” That wasn’t the kind of answer Lan SiZhui expected, and he contemplated changing a glance up again, but decided against it. Anyhow, it seemed like the brothers were finally past their differences, and Lan SiZhui was genuinely happy that Wei WuXian had a family again – one of those he grew up with, at least, since he’d always had family in Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui.

“Quit complaining! I’ve saved it for you, haven’t I?”

“Just because you couldn’t drink it because of the silencing spell.”

“How ungrateful! What would sister say to that?!” At that, Lan SiZhui expected the awkward, painful silence that always followed the mention of Jiang YanLi, but there was none as Jiang WanYin answered:

“She’d say I’m right, because I am!”

“You! Don’t forget your manners!”

“Oh! So, you care about manners now?”

“Ungrateful.” Wei WuXian spat like he wasn’t afraid of getting whipped. There was a long pause, and Lan SiZhui could hear them walking around. They still haven’t come around the section of the library where Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were working. After a few more moments of just walking around, Wei WuXian noted:

“These are all boring. Poetry and textbooks.”

“What did you expect? Lotus Pier has the same books.” Jiang WanYin sounded like he was rolling his eyes.

“There’s a section in Lotus Pier that’s much more exciting.” He had a teasing, mischievous lilt to his tone, suggestive. Jiang WanYin snorted.

“You mean those three porn books you hide behind the ancient texts nobody looks at?”

“There’s five.” Senior Wei said distracted and Lan SiZhui heard pages being turned before a book thumped softly on a shelf. “And I look at them.”

“Just because you’re weird.”

“Hey!” There was a shuffle of feet and some grunts, before Jiang WanYin spoke.

“Enough, enough! You’ll destroy the library. Do you want more punishment?”

“Who wants more punishment?” Wei WuXian scoffed. “It would be your fault anyways!”

“Why would it be my fault?!” Lan SiZhui had never heard Sect Leader Jiang so... light before. Unthreatening. Playful. It was bizarre.

“You called me weird!”

“I call you weird all the time!”

“See! Why?”

“Because you are!” There was a long pause, then a snort.



“I’m bored, let’s go.” Wei WuXian said after a minute with a whine in his voice.

“You’re always bored!” Jiang WanYin complained, but their footsteps and voices were already fading.

“You should entertain me better then! I’m never bored with sister!” With that, the door closed and Lan SiZhui let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“You heard that too, I didn’t imagine it, right?” Lan JingYi asked from beside him slowly forming his words.

“Yeah.” Lan SiZhui said faintly, similarly finding it hard to speak in their position.

“Sect Leader Jiang was... normal.” Lan JingYi grunted. “As normal as a person with his temper can be. And with Wei WuXian of all people!”

Lan SiZhui found it peculiar as well, but he remained quiet. He didn’t know what kind of relationship the two had before the war, but he thought if it was filled with as much affection as this interaction felt it was, he hurt for what Wei WuXian lost for those weeks he returned and Sect Leader Jiang handled him like his worst nightmare. He felt sad but happy too, because even if it was constant bickering, they seemed to finally come level with each other.

After a long pause, Lan JingYi asked: “Hey, does that mean you’ll need to call him uncle from now?” And Lan SiZhui groaned, thinking maybe this reunion wasn’t as good as he initially thought.



They had to take a break every hour or so to make sure they didn’t actually get sick or permanently damage their brains. Usually, they were too busy trying not to throw up, faint or both at the same time to get away and down to the forbidden area and investigate. They didn’t break for meals either, but around noon, the library’s doors opened again.

“Lan SiZhui? Lan JingYi?!” They heard a familiar voice and looked towards each other as much as they could. The person who entered waited a beat then started to leave, just as Lan JingYi was leaving his position. He called out:

“Jin Ling, wait!” The footsteps halted before exiting and Lan SiZhui came out of his position as well. They were too dizzy to go find him, so Lan JingYi called out again: “Go towards east, then towards north, then turn west, you’ll have seen us then!”

Jin Ling followed the instructions and sure enough he appeared in the section after a moment. His face brightened. He was in Jin colored robes but they were slightly different, less pretentious, simpler, like most common disciples’. As soon as he saw them, he rushed over.

“Finally! I’ve been looking for you for ages, nobody knew where you were except ZeWu-Jun! What’s up with that, by the way?” He made a face. “What’s up with *everything*, by the way?” He scoffed. Then he seemed to notice the state they were in and his frown deepened. “What happened to you two?”

“Punishment.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“For the other night?” Jin Ling’s eyes widened as he settled in front of them. Lan JingYi shook his head.

“We stayed out past curfew last night and got caught. Hanguang-Jun was in a bad mood and took us to ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster, who ordered us to copy Righteousness fifteen times doing the handstand. We’re going to die by the time we finish!” He whined. Jin Ling’s eyes widened.

“You got such a severe punishment for sneaking out?! Your Sect is truly unhinged!” He shook his head in horrified wonder. Lan SiZhui looked at him disapprovingly. Jin Ling seemed to shrink back a little at the look before shaking it off. “Anyways, I have something very strange to tell you!”

“Us too!” Lan JingYi said excited.

“Sect Leader Jin, you start.” Lan SiZhui said.

“Of course, I’m first.” He scoffed, then started speaking: “Yesterday morning I woke in an inn in Chenling. Upon waking I saw the inn was filled with LanlingJin disciples and asked them what was going on.”

“Demanded, more likely.” Lan JingYi muttered under his breath, rolling his shoulders.

“Anyways.” Jin Ling glared at him. “When I talked to them, they didn’t seem to recognize me! I told them I was their Sect Leader and they laughed! Then this guy walks in and everybody bows and calls him Young Master Jin! I asked them why they were bowing, who that person was, but they just frowned at me like I was supposed to know! Then we started traveling. This Young Master Jin took us to Caiyi Town, where he booked a whole inn for himself and we managed to spend the night there. The disciples would ignore me and look at me strangely as I demanded them to tell me what was going on! This morning we set off again, and thankfully, came to the Cloud Recesses. This Young Master Jin said we came for the GusuLan lectures! Aren’t they only held once in a generation?!”

“They are.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“What is going on?” Jin Ling asked and, in that moment, it was painfully obvious it was only a year ago that he left the title Junior Young Master and came to age at sixteen. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were two or three years his seniors, while he was already leading his own Sect.

“Something strange happened to us also.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Yesterday we saw ZeWu-Jun walking around, so naturally, we wanted to see if he was alright, if he came out of seclusion. When we asked him, he got confused and didn’t call us by our names. We thought he might just be disoriented because of what happened in the Temple. We wanted to find Hanguang-Jun to ask him about it, but we haven’t found him. He was out, investigating something. So, we waited until it was reported he returned early evening. We didn’t get a chance to talk to him until after curfew. We approached him and Senior Wei—”

“Isn’t he traveling?”

“...and Hanguang-Jun scolded us! He returned us to ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster. This is where it gets interesting.” Jin Ling leaned forward curiously. “ZeWu-Jun and Lan QiRen... asked us who we were!” Jin Ling raised skeptical eyebrows.

“Right, sometimes I forget disciples’ names too, why is it so strange?” He frowned.

“Besides that, that ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster *never* forget *anything*?” Lan JingYi crossed his arms. Jin Ling frowned at him.

“Of course, they do, you just didn’t notice.”

“How about Lan SiZhui?” Lan JingYi raised his chin in challenge.

“What about him?” Jin Ling side-eyed Lan SiZhui, who lowered his eyes, the event of last night upsetting still now.

“Think! Who raised Lan SiZhui as his own son? If for nothing else, the fact that Hanguang-Jun took in an orphan out of nowhere should be memorable, not to mention he’s somewhat of family to ZeWu-Jun and Lan QiRen, and they raised Lan SiZhui when Hanguang-Jun wasn’t here to do so himself.”

Jin Ling looked at Lan SiZhui for a long moment, then shook his head.

“They forgot their own nephew?”

“Right?!” Lan JingYi exclaimed. “And I’m family too, my father was a cousin of ZeWu-Jun’s, that’s why I was raised so closely with Lan SiZhui. We’re like brothers. They wouldn’t forget me either.”

“But how did it happen?” Jin Ling asked. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look at that. Lan JingYi swallowed and looked down.

“We suspect it has something to do with the music we played the other night.”

“The sheets you sneaked out of the forbidden section?” Jin Ling looked over his shoulder like the book would be there in plain sight. “But you said it was harmless!”

“It was!” Lan JingYi exclaimed. “Or it should’ve been!” He shook his head. “I don’t know what happened. I’m not even convinced it was the music. I’ve played them before and nothing happened.”

“Isn’t your Sect known for their musical techniques?”

Lan SiZhui answered: “The musical cultivation of our Sect is very complex. It requires the user to seep spiritual energy not only into the instrument but each command individually. The commands are voiced by the musical notes of our instruments. It is different from a sword technique in that it is not a physical skill but an intellectual one. One must have perfect control over their spiritual energies and have deep knowledge of the commands they’re

giving for it to work. It is why it's so hard to learn, but also why it is, once learned, one of the most powerful cultivation techniques."

"So, you couldn't have accidentally activated the music?"

"Simply put, no." Lan SiZhui shook his head. Jin Ling made a face. "What is it, Sect Leader Jin?"

"What if someone doesn't know that much about this technique and tries to use it?"

Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look.

"The spell could go wrong, but most likely it wouldn't have any effect. Without deep knowledge, the guqin cannot be used for cultivation."

"I see." Jin Ling looked down, deep in thought. "What is the plan?" He looked up after a long moment and Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a questioning look. Jin Ling rolled his eyes. "Lan SiZhui would've wanted to report this to ZeWu-Jun the moment you realized something wasn't right. Obviously, you're not there, being kicked out for not only sneaking in and out of the Room of Forbidden Books, but playing some sheets from there as well. So Lan JingYi must've convinced you not to go to ZeWu-Jun yet. So, what's the plan?"

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a surprised, impressed look.

"Young Mistress Jin, night-hunting together really improved your thinking!" Lan JingYi grinned and Jin Ling glared at him for it.

"Don't be so cheeky!" He barked. "Night-hunting together has nothing to do with it! I've always been a good thinker, I just never had the chance to show off because the two of you were always in my way!"

"Sect Leader Jin really has some impressive skills." Lan SiZhui complimented diplomatically. "And so he is correct. We've decided to give ourselves a day to figure out the matter before seeking help from our seniors."

"And, what's the plan?" Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look, then looked back at Jin Ling expressionless. "What, you don't have a plan?"

"Of course, we have a plan! We thought we might visit the forbidden section today. It would be good to do it during the day, but our punishment is too severe, we should return after dark." Lan JingYi said. It wasn't like they talked about it, but this was the logical next step. Even though Lan SiZhui would still like to do it during the day, because he was serious the previous night – breaking even more rules would *not* help their situation.

"Are you crazy?!" Jin Ling glared. "Isn't that how you got into this mess in the first place?!"

"But we need to figure out why our seniors forgot us." Lan JingYi said desperately. "Or you have a better plan?" He challenged.

“Well, you could at least forgo punishment to sneak in now. Hidden like this, no one would notice you’re gone.”

“Neglecting punishment is a violation of the Sect Rules.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Then I’ll go alone, just point me to the forbidden section.” Jin Ling frowned at him. Lan JingYi shook his head.

“You don’t know what you’re looking for and where. The Forbidden Room has as many books as the library, you’d never find it.”

“Then I’ll do your punishment while you’re going down.” Jin Ling gestured at the abandoned texts.

“Passing on responsibility is a violation of the Sect Rules.” Lan SiZhui inserted. Jin Ling glared at him.

“Do you have a rule against breathing too loudly, too?” He snapped. A little embarrassed, Lan SiZhui said quietly:

“*Regulate your breathing. Don’t pant harshly. Take even breaths.*” He recited the rules perfectly. Jin Ling just kept staring at him.

“It’s in vain anyways.” Lan JingYi said after a pause. “You can’t copy them doing a handstand.”

“I can do it sitting upright, no one will notice.” At that, Lan SiZhui reached over and took the two books in front of where his station was set up, put them in front of Jin Ling. One was perfectly calligraphed – one of Hanguang-Jun’s copies – and the other had slightly less perfect linework, a little shaky at places, a little different in sizes. “They look the same to me.” Jin Ling shrugged. At that, Lan JingYi huffed and took his own book and set it down next to Lan SiZhui’s. Jin Ling’s eyes widened.

The page was also acceptable by Lan standards, but it was not as perfect as either Lan WangJi’s or Lan SiZhui’s. The lines were visibly uneven, in a lot of places ink was scarce, because dipping their brush in it was more tiring than the writing itself. They were spotty and shaky.

“Okay, so, what happens if you forgo your punishment or pass it off? More punishment?” He snorted, like the idea was amusing. Lan SiZhui nodded. “You cannot be serious!”

“Breaking the rules while in punishment does not excuse the behavior, additional punishment is to follow.”

“So, you see, we cannot do it during the day.”

“But no one would catch you breaking it now. You can just say you’re copying slowly.”

“They know how fast we copy.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “We should be able to do five copies a day, or around that amount.”

“So, we will be quick.”

“Research takes hours, you know that.” Jin Ling was suspiciously quiet at that.

“Sect Leader Jin, is it possible you’ve never done excessive research on a topic before?” Lan SiZhui asked, purely out of curiosity, but Jin Ling took offense.

“So, what if I didn’t?!” He snapped, glaring. “It’s not like research is going to save my life!”

“I know now, why you don’t have patience for anything.” Lan JingYi snorted. “You were never confined to the library for days, just so you figure out how a spell or a curse works and could be lifted.”

“Because I know this stuff!” Jin Ling glared. “The teachers teach me, that’s why they’re there!”

“Our teachers give us books on our classes and tells us to find different sections we need to copy then recite to them.” Lan JingYi said proudly.

“Well my teachers tell me what I need to know and don’t force me to spend hours doing this stuff all the time!” Jin Ling crossed his arms across his chest. Feeling like they strayed from the original topic quite a lot, Lan SiZhui inserted before Lan JingYi could reply:

“Sect Leader Jin, Lan JingYi, let’s talk about our plans instead. As we told you, we’re intending on returning after it is not suspicious. We will research the topic and hopefully figure it all out. If we can’t, or if we get caught, we will tell *everything* to ZeWu-Jun.” He gave a significant look to Lan JingYi as he said ‘everything’.

Jin Ling opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it and huffed.

“Fine, I’ll help you.” He said, annoyed.

“Who asked for your help?!” Lan JingYi scoffed.

“I offered!” Jin Ling crossed his arms and raised his chin. Lan SiZhui noticed something but didn’t want to interrupt. “I was almost a region away when I woke up. Who knows what your music did to me!”

“How did you get to Chenling in a night anyways?” Lan JingYi frowned. Jin Ling shrugged.

“Sect Leader Jin, where’s your sword?” Jin Ling looked down like he expected the sword to be in his hand, then looked up with wide eyes.

“That’s the other thing!” He exclaimed. “That Young Master Jin had it! Like it belonged to him!” He shook his head in astonishment. “When I asked for it back—”

“You mean demanded.”

“Will you shut up?!” Jin Ling glared at Lan JingYi. “When I asked for it, Young Master Jin just frowned at me and walked away! Didn’t even acknowledge me!”

“That must’ve felt bad.” Lan JingYi repressed a chuckle.

“I’m Sect Leader, how dare he—!” Jin Ling huffed. “Anyways, yes, apparently, I’m swordless now! How embarrassing for the Sect Leader to walk around without his sword!”

“Sect Leader Jin, if the same thing happened to you as to us, I doubt these people even remember you’re Sect Leader.” Lan SiZhui said sadly. Jin Ling’s eyes widened then he looked down.

“Anyhow, we need to find the sheets and undo the spell.” Lan JingYi said. “Where are you staying now, do you know? Surely not in the Yashi.”

“Ah, they put us with the guest disciples! Like I’m some common disciple on a visit!” He shook his head.

“Then you shouldn’t be so closely watched during the night. Let’s meet after curfew behind the library.” Lan JingYi said, deep in thought. “If we’re lucky, we’ll just catch the shift change and can sneak in unnoticed.”

“You should leave a window open in case we’re unlucky.” Jin Ling offered. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui both shook their heads.

“A guard goes around after dark and closes every window that’s left open.” Lan SiZhui answered.

“Can’t you ask to be a guard tonight?” Jin Ling frowned. They shook their heads.

“Only senior disciples whose cultivation is low are allowed to be guards.” Lan SiZhui said.

“And we’ve got punishment all day.” Lan JingYi added. “Even Lan QiRen isn’t as harsh as to let us keep guard after such a day. He’d most likely order us to sleep.”

“Will you be alright to sneak out at night?” Jin Ling looked over them skeptically. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“This is only the first day. We’re used to this amount of punishment. It would be worse if we did it tomorrow, we’d be more tired then.”

“How long is this punishment going to take anyways?”

“Three days.” Lan JingYi estimated. “Maybe four if we’re slowing down.”

“Your Sect is so strange.” Jin Ling shook his head. “Anyways. Have you eaten yet? I don’t feel like having lunch with that Young Master Jin.” He scoffed. They shook their heads and Lan JingYi elaborated.

“We can’t eat during the day. Our stomach wouldn’t take the strain. I once sneaked some lunch during a punishment and…” He halted, embarrassed. Lan SiZhui remembered and closed his eyes, trying not to gag at the memory.

“Disgusting.” Jin Ling said after a pause, then sighed. “Fine, I’ll stay to keep you company.” He rolled his eyes like he was doing them a favor.

“Like I care what you do.” Lan JingYi scoffed.

“We should get back to it anyhow.” Lan SiZhui said, only now realizing how long they’ve been conversing. Lan JingYi sighed, but together, they got back into their positions, needing a minute to orient themselves. Jin Ling watched them for a few minutes, then got bored and stood, walking around, looking at books.

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Jin Ling was asleep by their side when someone else entered the library. After hours of reading this book or that, not finishing any and not returning them either, Jin Ling just sat down under a window in meditation pose and closed his eyes. Five minutes later he was leaning against the wall and snoring softly. The person entering had light footsteps and moved with purpose. Rounding the corner was a senior GusuLan disciple. He bowed to them.

“Brothers, you can leave now. The Grandmaster expects you to continue your punishment tomorrow.”

“Finally!” Jin Ling exclaimed and the senior disciple jumped a little at the unexpected voice. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui finished their last strokes and came out of position, groaning painfully. “This Lan QiRen is truly awful!” Jin Ling shook his head as he stretched.

“Uh, sir...” The senior disciple looked at him hesitantly. Lan JingYi was quick to come to his defense.

“Excuse him, brother!” He said respectfully. “We’re old friends and this disciple just wanted to spend today with us, which is why he is upset we had to do punishment. He does not truly mean his words. He’s just temperamental.”

“Who are you calling temperamental?!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “I’ll break your legs!”

“Ah!” Lan JingYi turned to the disciple. “See?” He smiled, hopefully reassuring.

“Sir.” The disciple turned to Jin Ling. “Please calm down. The Lan Sect rules forbid—”

“I know, I know!” Jin Ling waved an arrogant hand.

“We will make sure he’s more polite.” Lan SiZhui said with a weak bow, his arms feeling like rocks. The disciple pressed his lips together, nodding, then bowed to them and left a bit quicker than usual. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look, then turned to Jin Ling. “Sect Leader Jin, remember they forgot who you are. You mustn’t upset the GusuLan Sect until this problem is solved. We wouldn’t want you to be thrown out for misbehaving.”

“Fine.” Jin Ling scoffed after a pause, then took another, looking around. “You’re done for the day, right? And it isn’t curfew for another hour or so, so we have time. Why isn’t now good to go?”



Lan SiZhui shook his head. "Sect Leader Jin, we just finished a long day of punishment. As used as we are to it, it was still tiring. Please allow us to rest and dine before setting off." Jin Ling's eyes widened and he looked down in shame upon not thinking of their condition. Lan JingYi groaned as he tried to get on his feet, but fell back on the floor.

"After this is over, I won't be able to walk for a week. Maybe I'll just start using my arms as my legs." He complained, and even though Lan SiZhui would've put it differently, he agreed with the sentiment.

"This is truly overly harsh." Jin Ling said with furrowed brows. "You have to do this every time you get punished?"

"No." Lan SiZhui looked down. "Usually it's one section ten times, but we must've greatly upset the seniors last night, they punished us by having us copy the whole *Righteousness* fifteen times."

"Fifteen—!" Jin Ling exclaimed outraged. "How many have you done today?"

"I managed seven and a half." Lan SiZhui said and Lan JingYi glared at him.

"I did six!" He said with a frown. "How did we do so much?"

"That's strange. We usually manage around five a day."

"Because it's boring!" Lan JingYi groaned, then slowly stood on unsteady legs. "Alright, let's go. I'm starving."

Lan SiZhui agreed and stood as well. He was just as unsteady. Jin Ling watched them concerned as they shuffled out of the Pavilion slowly. At least he was generous enough to offer to carry their swords – well, maybe calling it an 'offer' was an overstatement. It was more like this:

*"What are you doing? You can barely stand; you're going to poke an eye out if you flail your swords like that. Give it to me! There. Now I'm assured you won't stab me."*

They headed towards the dining hall in silence, only the occasional complaint from Lan JingYi and a snappy answer from Jin Ling sounded.

As they entered the hall, some brothers looked over, eyes fixing on them in surprise. Their stare was divided between Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling. Lowering their heads, the two Lan disciples went to serve themselves, and Jin Ling followed them shortly. They all sat at their individual tables, Jin Ling carefully placing their swords on their tables before sitting at his own. The brothers were still looking as they started to eat, then someone walked hesitantly over to Jin Ling.

"Sir." He bowed to Jin Ling, who looked up with an annoyed expression. "Dinner had been delivered to the Jin Sect's guest rooms earlier in the evening."

"And?" Jin Ling frowned. "I want to eat here with my friends. Am I not allowed?!" He glared. Lan SiZhui's eyes widened. Didn't they just agree to act more polite?

“Of course, you’re allowed sir...” The disciple seemed to be at a loss, looking over some of his peers. They didn’t seem to know what to make of it either.

“Ah, brother, it’s fine.” Lan SiZhui spoke up quickly. “We invited Sect—uh, this Jin disciple to dine with us. Excuse us for the boldness.” He stood and with aching arms, bowed to the senior brother. He looked at Lan SiZhui in thought before nodding.

“Apologies for the intrusion.” The disciple returned the bow, then he left to go back to his meal. Jin Ling glared after him before muttering under his breath:

“How humiliating!”

“What?” Lan JingYi snorted. “Do you want to dine with us? Eat then. If you don’t, go back to that Young Master of yours.”

“He’s not my Young Master, and I’m talking about my situation you’re responsible for!” Jin Ling snapped. The commotion turned a few heads their direction.

“I’m responsible? I am?” Lan JingYi glared. “If I remember correctly, you were the one who came with me! You told Lan SiZhui we should play it—!”

“But you took—!” Before any of them could continue, Lan SiZhui hissed:

“Jin Ling! Lan JingYi!” which made them look over at his red face. “That’s enough!” Upon realizing they were quite public, both of them lowered their eyes in shame and slowly returned to their meals. Lan SiZhui lost his appetite. After some time, Lan JingYi looked over.

“Aren’t you eating?” He mumbled around some rice. Lan SiZhui looked up, contemplating sharing his thoughts, but instead he just shook his head, looking down. Lan JingYi lowered his chopsticks slowly, then his bowl knocked gently on the table as he, too, stopped eating. After Jin Ling finished, they stood and left. For a few minutes on their way towards the guest quarters, Lan JingYi asked gently: “Lan SiZhui, are you alright?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with you?” Jin Ling frowned at him arrogantly. “You hardly ate.”

“I wasn’t hungry.” He said quietly.

“Well, you should’ve eaten to regain your strength, those principles won’t copy themselves, and tonight...”

“I know what we’re doing tonight.” Lan SiZhui snapped, annoyed. They all stopped and Lan SiZhui turned to face Jin Ling. “Sect Leader Jin, I understand this is hard for you. I really do. You were Sect Leader, you just lost some of what little was left of your family and you have a lot of responsibilities you feel like you need to get back to. But it is not easy for us either. Please be patient and listen to us. We know how the Cloud Recesses work, and we know if this continues like this, we will be discovered. I know I don’t need to tell you how dangerous this situation can be.”

Jin Ling was watching him with growing horror as Lan JingYi was silently looking to the ground. After a long pause Jin Ling cleared his throat and looked away.

“Fine. I’ll listen to your directions for now. But don’t expect me to take any insults!” He glared. “That I am just a common disciple now doesn’t mean I’m any less of a cultivator!”

“A cultivator?” Lan JingYi furrowed his brows. “Young Mistress, do you think people know you for your cultivation?”

“You—I’ll break your legs!” Jin Ling threatened and Lan SiZhui smiled at the familiar argument as they continued their way towards the guest quarters. The Jin Sects’ quarters were the first one, but before they entered, Lan JingYi made a suggestion.

“I wonder who else is here for the lectures. Should we look?”

“I have nothing better to do.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“It is curfew soon, let’s not linger too much.” Lan SiZhui agreed. The three of them walked over to the second formation. Seeing Yunmeng disciples, Jin Ling froze.

“Wait, you said earlier…” He turned to Lan SiZhui. “Uncle is here as well?!”

“Uh…” Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a worried look. “Yes.”

“But, but!” Lan JingYi was quick to reassure: “If Hanguang-Jun, ZeWu-Jun, Grandmaster and Senior Wei hadn’t recognized Lan SiZhui, then there are chances he won’t recognize you either!”

“That’s right!” Lan SiZhui nodded quickly. Jin Ling was quiet for a few minutes, then he looked up with a careful expression.

“I don’t know if it’s a good thing because I won’t be yelled at, or a bad one because he won’t recognize me.” That was true, Lan SiZhui looked down sadly. Then Jin Ling shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, he’ll make up for the yelling once he learns what we did. He might even truly break my legs, too!” He said with wide eyes and Lan SiZhui nodded. They continued their way down the path. The next formation was busy with Nie Sect disciples. They moved away without comment. The next two were of two bigger Clans they hadn’t recognized, so they returned to the beginning of the path.

“Behind the library, after curfew.” Lan JingYi repeated and Jin Ling nodded.

“Be careful not to get caught. The night guards should be few around the main buildings, but ZeWu-Jun and Lan QiRen often converse after lectures, so they might be out.” Lan SiZhui warned and Jin Ling nodded seriously. Then his expression changed.

“I wish I had my sword and Fairy.”

“Your dog is gone too?” Lan JingYi asked with a pained expression. “What a pity!”

“Right.” Lan SiZhui nodded, not so fond of the spirit animal. He bowed to Jin Ling and Lan JingYi followed his example. With that, they left.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Lan JingYi's sword: 蚱蜢 Zhàměng: "grasshopper"

Lan JingYi's birthname: (蓝)程 (Lán) Chéng: “surname/rule/order/regulations” (Just to understand the hilarity, Jiang Cheng uses the character 澄, which also uses the second tone. :D)

Lan JingYi's father: (蓝)晨光 (Lán) ChénGuāng: “morning light”

Lan JingYi's mother: (苏)捉鰥 (Sū) ZhuōXuān: Zhuō: “to grab” Xuān: “surname/clever/intelligent”

## Guilt II.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You’re standing on my toes!” Jin Ling hissed as they moved around the pavilion slowly. Lan SiZhui halted and glared back, although it was too dark to see either their faces. Lan JingYi met him in front of the Lan disciples’ rooms and together they successfully reached the library. They only had to wait a few minutes for Jin Ling to arrive, who reported he almost got caught by the Jin Sect disciples, but he used some lame excuse to get out.

“I’m not!” Lan JingYi hissed back at the boy.

“Quiet!” Lan SiZhui whispered back. He looked out from behind the corner at the night guard standing in front of the library.

“Why are they guarding it at night anyways?” Jin Ling whispered annoyed. “It’s just a library! You’d think thousands of copies of the Lan principles are not that important to guard.”

“There are very rare texts within, now quiet!” Lan SiZhui told him.

After a pause, Lan JingYi added: “And the copied principles are being sold in Gusu and traded with other Sects. It’s not like we just copy then throw them away.”

“That’s why the GusuLan Sect is so wealthy?” Jin Ling pondered. “I’ve always been wondering, with you refusing any rewards for night-hunting.”

“Because we help people out of the goodness of our hearts and not for cheap rewards!” Lan JingYi hissed back. “Unlike some Sects.”

“Whose Sect are you calling selfish?!” Jin Ling at least had the mind not to actually exclaim, only in a whisper.

“If you keep it up, we will get caught!” Lan SiZhui said.

“A guard is coming!” Lan JingYi warned and the three of them pulled back not to be seen. As they expected, the two guards started to converse. It shouldn’t take long, so they needed to be quick. Lan SiZhui took lead as he rushed up to the door, producing a key Lan JingYi got from somewhere – and he didn’t want to know where. Opening the lock quickly, he opened the door a sliver, just enough to squeeze through. Jin Ling was first, then Lan JingYi, then Lan SiZhui. He secured the lock as much as he could from the inside through the slit in the door, then closed it fully.

They looked at each other and nodded, going over to the shelf that held the secret door. Normally, only the main family in the Sect would be able to open it, but Lan SiZhui had

received so much of their spiritual energy in his life, he knew for a fact his Golden Core was recognized more as a Lan's than a Wen's.

Even though he wasn't Hanguang-Jun's son by birth, in every other aspect he was. He was never going to inherit the Sect Leader title as long as there would be a biological heir, but at least he had a few privileges such as entering somewhere protected by specific wards that kept common disciples out. Lan JingYi could also open it, since his father was family to the Sect Leader.

Lan SiZhui opened the door with a swipe of his sword, spiritual energy answering eagerly. He felt reassured that this, at least, hadn't changed. They got inside and pulled the door shut. It was dark down there.

"Has anyone got a fire charm?" Jin Ling whispered. Lan SiZhui produced a talisman from his sleeve activating it. The room was eerie in the brief firelight, but they noticed a lantern on one table and Lan SiZhui was quick to light it, painting the room in a dim orange glow.

"Right." Lan JingYi straightened, talking in a normal tone. "The sheets should be..." He looked around, then headed forward towards a set of shelves. "Here." He said, then looked over the shelf, searching.

"Well?" Jin Ling raised impatient eyebrows.

"Uh, just a moment..." Lan JingYi grumbled as he lifted some volumes to look under them, pushed away some scrolls...

"Lan JingYi." Lan SiZhui prompted nervously.

"Just a moment, I'm sure it's here somewhere."

"Lan JingYi." Jin Ling urged after a few more minutes of Lan JingYi looking over the books. Said boy looked around, eyes wide.

"It's not here."

"Don't tell me you forgot where it was!" Jin Ling exclaimed and Lan SiZhui quickly hushed him.

"I didn't!" Lan JingYi whined. "It must've been moved. Quick, let's look over some shelves!"

"There are thousands of books here!" Jin Ling gestured around, hands on his hips. "You expect us to find it amongst them?!"

"Sssh!" Lan SiZhui glared, then looked up to listen if anyone heard them. Hearing no movement from upstairs, he asked Lan JingYi: "Do you know where the music sheets are stored, so we can look there first?"

"Yes!" Lan JingYi nodded eagerly. Lan SiZhui was not pleased Lan JingYi was so familiar with the place, but remained quiet. Lan JingYi went over to another shelf. "This one." He

tapped it, then moved on. Lan SiZhui nodded to Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes but trotted over to the shelf and started looking through it right away. "This one." Lan JingYi said from two selves down from Jin Ling's, then stood at the next one. "And this one." He started to search it, so Lan SiZhui stepped next to him.

After a few minutes of quiet, Jin Ling exclaimed. They all turned to look at him. "It's this one, right?" He asked, holding up a book. Lan JingYi rushed over, taking it and turning a few pages before he nodded. They went over to the table where the lantern was and put it on top. Lan SiZhui sat properly in front of the book, while Lan JingYi and Jin Ling looked over each of his shoulders, leaning on him heavily. He read the title:

### *Collection of Time*

He opened at the first page, hoping for a description, but it began with music sheets right away. He looked through the whole book, page by page, making sure he didn't miss anything. The music in the book was simplistic. Some of them were intended for cultivation while others were just what appeared to be songs. The one they played was of the latter, it was 'Spring Again'. It looked and from experience Lan SiZhui knew for a fact, it was quite beautiful. The most decorative song in the collection.

As he closed the book at last with a sigh, the two boys at his sides looked at him eagerly.

"Well?" They asked in unison.

"It doesn't say anything of its purpose, use, or how to reverse it."

"Should we play another song? See if it does anything else?"

"No!" Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling turned to Lan JingYi at the same time. "Lan JingYi, we shouldn't meddle with things like this. We should ask ZeWu-Jun or Grandmaster."

"Absolutely not!" Lan JingYi protested.

"Lan JingYi, the collection is too mysterious. We should hand it over and ask."

"We should do that research you mentioned." Jin Ling suggested. Lan SiZhui sighed and stood.

"Show us where it was, see if the surrounding books hide any clues. We're looking for information about the *Collection of Time* and the song: *Spring Again*." With that, Jin Ling nodded, went over the shelf and pointed at a stack of books.

"It was the second one in this pile."

"Everyone take two books." Lan SiZhui ordered, the routine of research and leading in night-hunts coming to him naturally. He was the first to pick two books, then Lan JingYi, finally Jin Ling. They went back to the table, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi settling across Lan SiZhui, who sat in his previous spot. They opened their books and read.

The lantern beside them gave off a faint light that made their eyes hurt to read by. It was hard to make out the seal script most books were written in. Lan SiZhui went through his two books much slower than he usually would've, but he did not find the desired information. His two companions didn't seem successful either, although Jin Ling was still only on his first book and Lan JingYi was yawning into his hand.

Lan SiZhui took the two books back and picked two others from the surrounding scrolls. By the time he finished with them, Jin Ling was done with his two, following his example and replacing them, taking other books from the shelf. Lan JingYi was asleep above his second book, head propped up on his fist.

It took them a few hours to get through the whole shelf. Lan JingYi woke after a stick of incense's time and went back helping them research. When they were finished with that one shelf, Lan SiZhui learned more about gruesome things than he ever wished, they still hadn't found relevant information.

"Should we stay and look over other shelves?" Jin Ling asked around a yawn. Lan SiZhui was unsure. On one hand, he wanted to give themselves a chance to figure it out on their own, but he also just wanted to confess and have someone more experienced and knowledgeable handle the problem.

"I don't think so." Lan SiZhui shook his head after a long pause. He turned to Lan JingYi. "Lan JingYi, I promised I'll give us a chance to solve this, but we haven't been able to and with each second we spend here, the more severe our crime is."

"What does it matter?" Lan JingYi asked with a pout and a sad, defeated voice. "We'll be thrown out anyways and it'll all be my fault, because I was bored and thought if Wei WuXian could get up to mischief in the Cloud Recesses, so could I. I was stupid. I should've never dragged either of you into this. It's all my fault."

"Sure is!" Jin Ling glared at him and Lan SiZhui frowned.

"Sect Leader Jin—"

"No." Jin Ling was uncharacteristically serious and Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes, accepting Jin Ling is going to put even more guilt on Lan JingYi's shoulders. "It is his fault." Jin Ling turned back to Lan JingYi, who was looking at the table, lips and chin wobbling. "It's your fault. So what? Are you going to sit here and sulk about it? Is that how the GusuLan Sect solves their problems? You give up?" Lan SiZhui looked up at that sharply. It's one thing to scold Lan JingYi but insulting the GusuLan Sect...!

"Tell you what," Jin Ling went on, "when I mess something up, uncle doesn't let me sulk. He throws me out the house and tells me to go and figure it out. And you know what I do? Do I sit down outside and cry? No! I go and try my best to figure it out! I don't always succeed, that's true, but still, I try my best! I hold out as long as I can, or else I go home, and face my uncle's disappointment. You think it's awful when he's angry?! Try to live in the shadow of the greatest cultivator who's ever lived and admit you can't live up to it!"



Lan SiZhui never thought that Jin Ling might be compared to Wei WuXian's greatness at Lotus Pier. He doubted it had been said to him either, but now that he mentioned it, Lan SiZhui could imagine how that made sense. Jiang WanYin had high standards, but they always thought it was because he was a harsh man, not because he saw someone in his nephew he once knew. The thought both saddened him and broke his heart again for the brothers. Once, they must've adored each other. To end up how they were now... It was truly a tragic story.

There was a long silence, while Lan JingYi seemed to absorb the words, then he looked up, eyes red-rimmed but dry and he grumbled:

"Stop being nice to me, it's weird when you're doing it."

"Do you want me to break your legs instead?!" Jin Ling glared and Lan SiZhui had to repress a smile at their usual bickering.

"What's with the legs anyways?" Lan JingYi frowned. "Can't you figure out something new?"

"It's my uncle's saying..." Jin Ling grumbled, looking down.

"Huh? And why is that?" Jin Ling sighed heavily.

"I don't know if it's true, I never asked him. But some older brothers, who survived the fall of Lotus Pier had said when they were children, Wei WuXian ran away from home because uncle sent him away. Apparently, he hid in the woods nearby and haven't returned for hours. Uncle and mother were worried for him, so they went after him – although mother told uncle to bring reinforcements. But uncle didn't, so he was wondering in the dark woods alone and tripped. They said he broke his leg that night and had been blaming Wei WuXian for it ever since, he promised one day he'll break Wei WuXian's legs in return."

That was a strangely touching, if a little disturbing story. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui looked at each other, then Lan JingYi snorted.

"What are you laughing at?!" Jin Ling glared at him furiously.

"It's just, only your uncle could send Wei WuXian away then break his own leg trying to find him." He chuckled and Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"I didn't used to believe the story, that uncle would do something like that for the YiLing Patriarch..." he fidgeted with a piece of paper in front of him. "But I guess I don't know people as I thought I did, especially not my own family."

"Sect Leader Jin..." Lan SiZhui started quietly, wanting to offer some words of comfort, but then Jin Ling visibly shook off his mood and raised his chin high.

"So? What are we going to do?" Lan JingYi didn't answer, only looked at Lan SiZhui with hopeful questioning. Lan SiZhui thought, then sighed.

“Let’s spend the night here. If we truly don’t find anything, we’ll go to ZeWu-Jun. Let’s not give up just yet.” At that, Lan JingYi brightened and scrambled on his feet.

“Let’s start with all the shelves that hold music, then move on to the others.” They all nodded and followed him to the shelf Lan SiZhui looked through before.

Book by book they read all night. Jin Ling also slumbered at one point, but he shook himself awake after an hour or so. Lan SiZhui didn’t feel the fatigue, but he knew he won’t feel as good come morning. Even with inedia he needed sleep to function, and doing handstands all day was surely going to be awful. Still, he relentlessly read every book, eyes skimming over irrelevant topics, studying essays about certain songs, but never the ones he was looking for.

He barely noticed as the basement windows slowly let light seep into the room, nor that his two companions were sleeping soundly on top of some scrolls. In the past hour he’d been reading some scrolls that were written especially messily, but which talked about a collection that had similar notes he saw in the *Collection of Time*. He hoped that there would be a mention of *Spring Again* as well.

So far, there had only been praises upon praises about some of the other songs, how delicately fabricated they were, how this note or that especially brings out the essence of the song... one song in particular was quite precious, for it was the one of the first recordings of a new cultivation method...

Lan SiZhui paused, and pushed the scroll away, looking through his carefully organized piles until he found at the bottom of one the *Collection of Time*. He thumbed through it, looking for one title. Seeing what he was looking for, he picked up the *Collection*, and brought it over where a guqin was resting on a table in front of a sheet holder. He propped the book up and without using spiritual energy, he played the first section of the song.

The way it had been written resembled an actual song, but upon playing, Lan SiZhui realized it was not. It was written in the musical language of Qin, which had been invented by the Lan Sect. Lan SiZhui recalled that he’d learned how Qin language had been created.

A long time ago, music was believed to have effect on souls. Later on, that theory had been confirmed and the studied for its effects deeply.

Every musical note had a different effect on souls. Some angered them, some soothed them. That was how *Cleansing* and other songs had been created. Later it had been defined to sections upon studying more of the effects of different notes. The notes most effective to sooth had been collected into ‘*Clarity*’, the notes most effective to free souls had been added and composed into ‘*Purify*’ and so on.

After its effects had been discovered and defined, the Lan Sect had studied it even deeper and discovered individual notes had individual responses. They had been recorded as specific phrases and words, and thus a language had been created. It was more delicate than *Cleansing* or any other cultivational songs, more direct.

While the Lan Sect had shared this knowledge with the cultivation world, they were the first ones to contact a soul using Qin language directly. They were the ones perfecting the

technique later named *Inquiry*. The more fluent one was in Qin language, the more powerful *Inquiry* was, the less likely a ghost could avoid questioning or lie. There was a collection of phrases most used in *Inquiry*, collected to be shared with the world without the world needing to learn Qin language itself. Lan SiZhui learned from it as well, when he first started learning musical cultivation.

The textbook contained of the phrases recorded individually. At first, to Lan SiZhui, the book looked like a sheet of a broken song with long pauses, before he learned it was not a song at all. That was the only difference between how *Inquiry* and *Song of Winter* had been recorded. *Song of Winter* actually looked like a song, while it was just a series of phrases, complete sentences and questions, without being separated individually. Hearing it, he recognized them.

The section he'd just played was similar to the question "Who are you?" in *Inquiry*, but the notes used weren't as specific as they were in *Inquiry*. It would sound more like "Who you?" if asked a ghost. He played the second section. "What in the past?" was the accurate translation of the song. It resembled "What happened?" from *Inquiry*. So, it *was* an early and inaccurate version of *Inquiry*!

"What are you doing?" He heard a mumbled voice from the side. He looked over and saw Lan JingYi, his eyes barely open, his forehead ribbon crooked as he lifted his head from the table, looking past Jin Ling's slumped form at Lan SiZhui.

"Just testing a theory." Lan SiZhui said as he turned the pages until he got to *Spring Again*. He studied the notes carefully, this time. He slowly rose his hands and started playing, needing to hear the melody to be able to analyze it.

"What—?!" Lan JingYi pushed on his feet, then stumbled over, collapsing at the end of the guqin table. "Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui, what are you doing?!" He panicked. "You can't play it again!"

"Quiet!" Lan SiZhui ordered as he listened to the notes. When he got where his suspicions lay, he stopped and looked at the sheet carefully again before playing. "Listen." He instructed as the notes left the guqin.

"I know this song." Lan JingYi frowned.

"Of course, you do, it's the reason we're here in the first place." Jin Ling said from where he watched the two of them, frowning as well.

"No, I don't mean from here." He said and Lan SiZhui saw the realization draw on him as well, coming to the same conclusion as Lan SiZhui earlier. "Is this *Inquiry*?"

"Mn. At least a version of it." Lan SiZhui pressed down on the strings. "It is '*Summoning*'."

"So, we summoned a ghost?" Lan JingYi furrowed his brows skeptically.

"Not quite. I'll play '*Summoning*' then this again. Listen carefully." He closed his eyes, recalling the notes of the sentence. It was more complicated than the first two questions he'd

played. While *Inquiry*, in general, was played to any ghost in close proximity, ‘*Summoning*’ always targeted a specific person only. Because the player needed to recall that one person only, it required more concentration. Translated, it would sound to the ghosts like this: ‘*I summon the ghost of this person, calling them from beyond the grave to ask them about the past*’.

He played it, then paused. He opened his eyes and turned to consult the sheets, playing the part. It would translate: ‘*I here summon those who are lost, old souls, rise and answer to my call. Come to me and show me, tell me your old tales*’.

“It sounds the same.” Jin Ling said with a yawn.

“It’s not. It contains elements of ‘*Summoning*’ but they’re not as accurate.”

“Which means?” Jin Ling finally stood, stretching before walking over.

“I don’t know yet, but listen to this.” Lan SiZhui turned the pages to the *Song of Winter*, found the section he played earlier and played it again.

“It sounds familiar.” Jin Ling said.

“It sounds very similar at least.” Lan JingYi inserted, realization drawing on him. “*Spring Again* had taken elements from *Inquiry*?”

“Not the *Inquiry* we know.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together. “*Song of Winter* is described, and studying it I can also confirm, as the early version of *Inquiry*.”

“So, we what? Talked to a ghost without knowing it?”

“I don’t think so.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I need to study this more before I can say for sure what effects it has. But Lan JingYi...” He looked at his friend seriously. “I might need to test my theories and I cannot do it by myself. I’m still just a student.”

“You’re the number one disciple of the GusuLan Sect!” Lan JingYi whined. “Please, you’re so good!”

“Lan JingYi, there’s good as me, who played *Inquiry* twice in real situations so far, and then there’s Hanguang-Jun who had been playing half his life.”

“How will you ever get better if you don’t practice?” Lan JingYi countered.

“Lan JingYi, that’s my point exactly. This isn’t practice. This isn’t play. This could have dangerous effects. It should only be allowed to be played in the Mingshi, and I cannot enter there without permission and it’s impossible to sneak in, unlike here.”

“Can’t you just guess? Do you have to play?” Jin Ling asked with a frown. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I could only guess if I had a lot of experience with *Inquiry* and its effects. As it is, I’m too inexperienced to theorize.” He paused, looking at Lan JingYi’s fallen expression. He touched

the other's arm. "At least we figured out this much. It is vital information and it's going to help ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun figure it all out all the sooner."

"What does it matter if we're going to be thrown out anyways?"

"Why are you so insistent on being thrown out?" Jin Ling threw up his hands. "Everybody makes mistakes, everybody breaks rules. It's not that big of a deal as you make it out to be. Stop being so dramatic."

"Sect Leader Jin, I'm afraid I have to argue." Lan SiZhui said quietly. "Sneaking into the library after curfew might not be that 'big of a deal', but Lan JingYi broke into the Forbidden Room and stole a volume, not only that, he played from it. It is not just a section of the library for vulgar collections. The volumes here, using their contents could kill. It is not only a high-ranking offense, but a serious crime we've committed. We'll be lucky if we only get thrown out and not thrown into a dungeon for the rest of our lives."

"What?!" Jin Ling glared. "And you dragged me into this, made me read all these books knowing that?" He fumed. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier?!"

"Sect Leader Jin, don't worry!" Lan JingYi was quick to reassure. "You might get punished but you won't suffer the same consequences as us, you're not a GusuLan disciple!"

"But you two are!" Jin Ling argued. "That's it, nobody can ever know we've ever been here!"

"If we don't figure out what happened, nobody will ever remember us!" Lan JingYi argued. "I hate to say it, but Lan SiZhui is right. We need to include Hanguang-Jun."

"Absolutely not!" Jin Ling stood and glared at them, fists clenching at his sides. Lan SiZhui imagined if he still had Suihua, it would be unsheathed now. "Lan JingYi, you're an orphan. If you lose the GusuLan Sect, what will be left for you? And Lan SiZhui! You just got your family back!" His harsh words were like whips against Lan SiZhui's back. "Do you want to lose them before you got to spend time with them?"

"What other choice do we have?" Lan JingYi sank his fingers into his hair, disturbing his updo. "We either live our lives exiled or live without anyone remembering us."

"And what's so bad about that?" Jin Ling huffed, crossing his arms. He hadn't yet realized Lan JingYi was mainly arguing for Lan SiZhui's sake, he was already willing to keep his mouth shut. "You can regain your places as best disciples. You can get to know your family again. I can finally let go of stupid Sect Leader duties and live without constant threats being shouted at me. We finally get a break from the expectations our seniors put on us."

"Is that a good thing?" Lan SiZhui asked quietly.

"How is it not?!" Jin ling turned to him. "Or do you really want to be the Wen amongst the Lan? Remember, you just got back not long ago. When would the rumors have started? When would the Lan disciples have started to see you differently? Like a Wen?"

“How do you know about that anyways?” Lan JingYi frowned at him and Jin Ling’s eyes widened as he tapped his lips in embarrassment.

“Your uncle told you, right?” Lan SiZhui asked quietly. Jin Ling was quiet for a long time, then huffed.

“So, what if I know? It’s an open secret anyways. Everybody is talking about it in Koi Tower, it’s not like I wouldn’t have learned of it anyways.”

“They really talk about it?” Lan SiZhui looked up at him.

“You paraded through YiLing, the Burial Mounds and Nightless City with the Ghost General like you were close. Of course, they talk, they heard it from Lotus Pier where it first been talked about.”

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui looked down. It didn’t even occur to him when he and Wen Ning went to the Burial Mounds then Qishan to pay their respects to the Wen Sect that people might... talk.

“Anyways. It reached Lotus Pier and Koi Tower, it was only the matter of time before it reached Gusu. You know how everyone views that few Wen who survived, nobody wants to associate with one.”

“Not helping!” Lan JingYi hissed, but Lan SiZhui didn’t care. It was true and he appreciated Jin Ling speaking up.

“Anyhow, I don’t see why them forgetting us is such a big deal. We’ll live a new life.”

“How about how you’re treated in your Sect?” Lan JingYi asked with an arrogant air. Jin Ling flinched.

“I already have plans to deal with that!” He said proudly.

“Oh?” Lan JingYi teased.

“Yes! I’ll go to Lotus Pier as a guest disciple!” He sounded like he was making that up on the spot, but honestly, it didn’t sound like a bad plan.

“Oh.” Lan JingYi must’ve realized the same thing. Around that time was when Lan SiZhui noticed they weren’t trying to make out each other’s expression anymore, but could see clearly. The light from the windows was strong now! His eyes widened and he stood abruptly.

“It’s the morning!”

“Oh, shit.” Lan JingYi said, then tapped his lips with a shameful look at his cursing.

“Let’s put everything back. We’ll talk about this later, now we need to go and prepare for the day.”

“So, you won’t tell Hanguang-Jun?” Jin Ling asked as they were already picking up scrolls, putting them back where they hoped they belonged.

“Not yet.” Lan SiZhui huffed, somewhat annoyed. “As I said, we’ll talk about this more. Maybe after or during dinner tonight. At my quarters.”

“Okay.” Jin Ling nodded as he put out the lantern. They were done in minutes, then quickly rushed up the stairs.

Just as the Room of Forbidden Books closed behind them, the library door opened and the three of them spun around, caught almost red-handed by the duo standing in the doorway.

“Um.” Lan JingYi said as he stared at the seniors wide-eyed. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui wore similar expressions. Being the number one disciple, Lan SiZhui was quick to remember his manners and stepped forward, bowing deeply. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling followed his example.

“ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun!”

“Hanguang-Jun?” ZeWu-Jun asked with a puzzled tone.

“We’re going to die.” Lan JingYi breathed in the silence that followed.

“Lan SiZhui, you seem to be the one who could explain calmly and orderly what you three are doing here.” ZeWu-Jun turned to Lan SiZhui curiously, his animosity from the other night gone, replaced by his usual amusement.

“ZeWu-Jun, we apologize for breaking the rules again.” Lan SiZhui stalled, trying to think. Should he lie and not get in as big of a trouble or tell the truth and get some answers? He turned briefly towards his friends. Lan JingYi was pleading with his eyes not to say anything, while Jin Ling’s was wide with fear, although he tried to cover it with an up-tilt of his chin. In the end, Lan SiZhui fell quiet. He truly couldn’t decide.

“ZeWu-Jun.” Lan JingYi stepped forward with another bow. “The truth is, it is all my fault. Lan SiZhui is torn about what to say because he’s too loyal to set me up, but he doesn’t want to lie.” He paused at ZeWu-Jun’s curious glance at him. “Truth is, I wanted to sneak into the Room of Forbidden Books.” He lowered his eyes and fell quiet, preparing himself to tell his seniors what he did.

“We failed, but by the time we realized we couldn’t, the guard hadn’t left, so we spent the night here.” Jin Ling spoke suddenly and both Lan disciples turned to him surprised. He raised arrogant eyebrows at them.

“Se—Young Master Jin, you needn’t to get involved, we were the ones who—” Lan SiZhui started, but Jin Ling rudely cut him off.

“So, what if this was your idea in the first place? I’m here as well, aren’t I?” He scoffed. “The three of us broke in, now the three of us need to face our punishment.”

“How valiant of the Young Master Jin.” Lan JingYi frowned at him, not meaning his words. Jin Ling’s eyes narrowed at him.

“I’m not! You remember your Sect’s rules? How was it? Passing responsibility to others is forbidden?” He glanced at Lan SiZhui, who nodded, swallowing, still looking at the seniors who watched them, ZeWu-Jun curiously, Hanguang-Jun coldly. “See?” Jin Ling looked at Lan JingYi with a triumphant expression. ZeWu-Jun spoke up after a pause.

“Young Master Jin, Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui. Young Master Jin is correct. It’s obvious the three of you did this together, no matter whose idea was it. You say you didn’t get into the Room?” Jin Ling shook his head. “And all you did was to sneak out after curfew, into the library?” Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui joined Lan JingYi’s nod. Lan SiZhui figured it wasn’t a lie, only part of the truth was missing. There was a longer pause. “How many copies have you managed to make yesterday?”

“Seven and a half.” Lan SiZhui answered quietly.

“Six and three sections.” Lan JingYi bit his lip.

“Four more are added to the fifteen you’ve already started.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed, accepting the punishment grateful it wasn’t more. “As for Young Master Jin...” ZeWu-Jun trailed off.

“XiChen.” Hanguang-Jun spoke for the first time since they’ve been there. ZeWu-Jun turned to him curiously. “Let him join Wei WuXian.”

“Three hundred?” ZeWu-Jun hummed, then nodded. “Young Master Jin, you shall copy our principles three hundred times.”

“What?!” Jin Ling’s eyes widened as he glared. “That’s not fair, I haven’t even broke that many rules, and—”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui warned him. Looking over, Jin Ling glared at him, then huffed.

“Whatever.” He crossed his arms across his chest. “I’ll do better than Wei WuXian anyways.” At that, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look. Didn’t he know Senior Wei knew the rules almost as well as the Lan disciples? He could probably copy them with his eyes closed. “He’s not that good!” Jin Ling exclaimed upon seeing their shared glance.

“Of course, he is, Young Mistress.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes, forgetting about their audience. “He’s Wei WuXian.”

“So what?!” Jin Ling glared. “I can beat him at everything! I stabbed him, remember?” At that, both Lan disciples glared at him and he immediately looked down in shame. “Don’t look at me like that, he’s better now.”

“Young Master Jin, when did you stab Wei WuXian?” ZeWu-Jun asked with furrowed brows and Jin Ling looked away embarrassed. When no one answered him, ZeWu-Jun looked towards Lan SiZhui. He immediately said:

“At Koi Tower as he was trying to escape... You don’t remember, ZeWu-Jun?” He asked worried. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi had nothing to do with that! How did he forget... oh.



But Jin Ling had, and he was cursed as well. “Oh, right, you don’t.” He looked down. ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun shared a more than puzzled look, then ZeWu-Jun looked back towards them.

“Anyhow, I hope it won’t cause problems between the two of you as you’ll need to work next to each other on your punishments.” ZeWu-Jun said, not unkindly.

“He’s the one who can’t behave!” Jin Ling exclaimed. Upon noticing nobody had a reaction to that, he looked away. “We’ll be fine.”

“Good.” ZeWu-Jun repressed a smirk, then turned to Lan JingYi. “Lan JingYi. Since you’re already here, I might as well take you away now.”

“Take me away?!” He asked alarmed. “You just said it didn’t matter whose idea was it you won’t punish me even more severely, will you?”

“No.” ZeWu-Jun said, a serious note entering his voice and face. “Grandmaster Lan and I need to talk to you in private.”

The three boys looked at each other in alarm. Jin Ling was opening his mouth to ask, but Lan SiZhui watched Hanguang-Jun and shook his head. His adoptive father’s mood hadn’t improved since the other night, they shouldn’t argue.

“I’ll leave the two of you with WangJi then.” ZeWu-Jun nodded to his brother, who inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Come, Lan JingYi.” Lan JingYi visibly swallowed, looking over at Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling with wide, terrified eyes before bowing to Jin Ling briefly forgetting about himself, then joined ZeWu-Jun, who turned out of the library.

Hanguang-Jun moved as soon as they were gone, heading to the main table. He placed Bichen on the tabletop, prepared some papers, all the while not even sparing them a glance.

“What do you think happened?” Jin Ling asked Lan SiZhui in a whisper as they were left to their own devices. Lan SiZhui suspected it was just after breakfast, so he should start his punishment soon. He wasn’t looking forward to it. He shook his head quietly as he watched his adoptive father prepare some volumes to copy. “Do you think the old man figured him out from the other night?”

“That’s not possible.” Lan SiZhui whispered back. “Lan JingYi was careful and wasn’t seen. It must be some other reason the Grandmaster requested his presence.”

“But what could it be?”

“Maybe it’s about our identities being unknown.”

“But shouldn’t they ask you about it as well?” That was also why Lan SiZhui had doubts in his theory, although...

“Lan JingYi told them who his parents were the other night. They must’ve figured out something related to them.”

“You two told them who you were?” Jin Ling sounded surprised.

“They wanted to know and at the time we didn’t—”

“Speak up or do not speak.” Hanguang-Jun’s cold voice cut through the quiet of the library and Lan SiZhui immediately looked down. His adoptive father rarely used to be so cold, only when he was dealing with other disciples. Lan SiZhui had no idea how to talk to a Hanguang-Jun who didn’t care about him as deeply as he used to. Hanguang-Jun looked up from where he organized his volumes. “Go and carry on with your punishment.” He told Lan SiZhui, who bowed to him deeply. Without a glance at Jin Ling, he went back to his setup in the back room.

He arranged his materials and got into position just as the library door opened.

“Good morning, Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian sang as he entered the room.

“Both of you chose a table and start copying. Your materials had been prepared. Nothing else is needed.” Hanguang-Jun sounded as distant as ever and Lan SiZhui felt frustration bubble up in him before he calmed down and picked up his brush.

“Huh? And who would you be?” Wei WuXian didn’t sound pleasant. “One of *Junior* Young Master Jin’s servants?”

“Who are you calling servant?!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “I’ll break your legs!” There was a long pause, when nothing moved, only Lan SiZhui’s brush and Hanguang-Jun’s, he heard the gentle taps on the ink pot.

“Go to your tables.” Hanguang-Jun said evenly. There was some shuffling, then one body hit the floor heavily, another softly.

“Even your sitting down is pretentious.” Wei WuXian grumbled.

“You’re the one who sits like an undisciplined child!” Jin Ling argued back.

“I’m going to spend hours sitting here. Why shouldn’t I make myself comfortable?” Wei WuXian countered.

“If you learned how to sit properly, you would be comfortable like this, too!” Lan SiZhui itched to go over and tell Jin Ling to quit arguing. As it was, he just repressed a sigh as he kept copying.

“Stop talking. Start your punishment.” Hanguang-Jun said with an annoyed edge of his voice. There were twin sighs of anger, then the rustling of papers and tapping on inkpots started. That was the only sounds for a while, then Wei WuXian spoke after an hour or so:

“Why are you here for anyways?”

“None of your business.” Jin Ling snapped, and Lan SiZhui could imagine the eyeroll that followed the statement. His own were hurting, and his arms were trembling, so he placed the brush aside and came out of position. He rubbed at his arms, frowning at the numbness. He

sat in lotus position, closed his eyes and breathed deeply, opening his meridians to kickstart his body's natural energy flow and hopefully, lessen the pain in his body. Having spent the night up, he felt the fatigue now and couldn't help but linger in the position.

"Go back to your punishment." Came the sharp order, but for the first time since the issue with their memories started out, Lan SiZhui heard some emotion in his voice. It was almost... concern. Not quite, but a hint was there.

"Lan Zhan, we're both working quietly..." Wei WuXian said somewhat confused, pouting.

"Yes, Hanguang-Jun." Lan SiZhui said respectfully, bowing to the wall between them even if he couldn't see the man who sat in front of it with his back towards Lan SiZhui. He went back to position while he heard Wei WuXian's astonishment.

"There's a person behind the wall?! Is it a Lan disciple? Lan Zhan, are you hiding away your own rulebreakers while the two of us are here on display?" He sounded amused.

"Lan SiZhui is doing it upside down, his face is so red, it is not a pleasant sight. Personally, I'm glad he's back there and not here." Jin Ling grumbled. Lan SiZhui wanted to ask if he was aware Lan SiZhui could hear him, but he was fairly sure he knew.

"You know the great Lan disciple who broke the rules?" Wei WuXian sounded delighted. "It can't be! You and him broke them together?!"

"Quiet." Hanguang-Jun ordered curtly.

"Hey, Lan Zhan, your Sect is so proud, you don't want us to see you also break your own rules. Tell me, Lan Zhan, what did that disciple do to earn such punishment?" There was a long pause. "Or..." Wei WuXian sounded like he was deep in thought. "Was it *you* who got that disciple into trouble?" He sounded like he was grinning.

"I didn't get anyone into anything!" Jin Ling argued heatedly. "If anything, I got them out—!" He trailed off, surely realizing what he was going to say.

"Got them out of what?" Wei WuXian asked eagerly, amused.

"Nothing!" Jin Ling scoffed. "And why are you so slow at copying, aren't you familiar with the rules already?" He asked arrogantly.

"What are you talking about?" Wei WuXian pouted. "It is the first time I see them."

"Madman." Jin Ling scoffed, then fell quiet. Wei WuXian fell silent as well, and Lan SiZhui could finally concentrate on his own task. Now, he understood the appeal of the silence spell. After some time, Wei WuXian spoke up again.

"Lan Zhan, can I get a break? My hands are hurting from copying so much." He pouted. Lan SiZhui still had a few minutes before his hour was up.

"Mn." Hanguang-Jun said quietly. Two brushes knocked on inkpots as they were put away, then Wei WuXian groaned. From the crunching of bones Lan SiZhui suspected he was

stretching. He was so concentrated on his work, he didn't notice Jin Ling appearing before he plopped down under the window like yesterday. Lan SiZhui glanced over, then finished three more characters before he came out of position.

"Lan JingYi is still missing." Jin Ling said quietly as he watched Lan SiZhui knead and rub at his sore arms.

"As soon as you're done, you can go find him."

"You won't come with me?" Jin Ling glared at him, like Lan SiZhui offended him.

"Ah, Young Master Jin, I cannot. You're finished before lunch, so you can attend the afternoon lectures. I am required to work until dinner."

"How harsh!" Jin Ling huffed. Before he could continue, another form showed up at the punishment room and his face lit up upon seeing Lan SiZhui sitting there cross legged with Jin Ling. He grinned and stepped closer, crossing his arms.

"So, it's you!" Wei WuXian said, looking over Lan SiZhui. "I remember you from two nights before!" He nodded at Lan SiZhui with his chin. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes and nodded.

"Senior Wei."

"What are you doing here?!" Jin Ling glared at his uncle. "Don't you see we're talking amongst ourselves?!"

"Oh, if you wanted privacy, you shouldn't have chosen a place where everything can be heard on the other side of the wall!" Wei WuXian raised arrogant eyebrows at him. Jin Ling pursed his lips, looking away.

"Whatever. I'll just call Fairy—" He trailed off, huffing angrily. "I was wrong." He told Lan SiZhui with an air of someone who obviously continuing a started conversation, but wants the third party to hear every word. "There is one thing I'm going to miss from my old life." He took a dramatic pause, then looked over at Senior Wei with an evil smirk. "I'm gonna miss intimidating the great Wei WuXian with my *dog*!" He said the last words to Wei WuXian, whose eyes widened, spinning to look around.

"Senior Wei, do not worry. Pets are not allowed in the Cloud Recesses, besides Fairy is..." He trailed off, not sure where Fairy actually was. Jin Ling and him shared a look. "Lost."

"I'm not scared of your stupid dog anyways!" Wei WuXian relaxed at the news there were no dogs. He crossed his arms again, lifting his chin.

"Fairy is not stupid!" Jin Ling argued. Lan SiZhui drew in a deep breath, preparing himself to mediate between the two. He never got the chance, because from the other side of the wall, Hanguang-Jun's voice sounded.

"Lan SiZhui, go back to your punishment." Jin Ling glared at the wall, but Lan SiZhui looked at him pointedly and he looked away with a roll of his eyes. Lan SiZhui stood, bowing to the wall.

“Yes, Hanguang-Jun.” And prepared to return.

“Why are you calling him Hanguang-Jun? And why are you bowing to the wall?” Wei WuXian frowned. “It’s not like he can see.”

“One should always show respect when addressing their seniors, Senior Wei.” Lan SiZhui said, not turning around.

“You didn’t bow to me just now and you call me Senior!” Wei WuXian argued while Lan SiZhui went back to position. Jin Ling frowned at him.

“I know.” Lan SiZhui said without looking at Wei WuXian. After a moment of pause, Wei WuXian crackled up, holding his stomach as he laughed. Lan SiZhui was amused as well, but he tried to concentrate on reaching for his brush with cramping muscles.

“I like this disciple!” Wei WuXian declared as he grinned. “I’m not your senior anyways.” He said thoughtfully. “You look around seventeen, correct?” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, partly because talking was difficult upside down, partly because he didn’t like to think about why Wei WuXian didn’t know how old he was.

“Nineteen.” Jin Ling, surprisingly answered to him. “Why, how old are you? Oh, right, I know. Four?” He sneered. Wei WuXian snorted.

“But you’re younger than us.”

“I’m sixteen!” Jin Ling glared.

“See? Younger.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui grunted. Jin Ling turned to him immediately.

“What, are you okay?” He asked alarmed.

“Shut up.” Lan SiZhui pressed between his teeth.

“Break is over.” Hanguang-Jun said, as if just realizing they’ve been gone for a while now. “Go back to your punishments.”

“Hey, Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian walked over into the next room. Jin Ling left with a nod as well. “Can we do our punishments with Lan SiZhui? He’s much more fun than you!”

“Do not disturb others’ punishment.”

“I do not! Lan SiZhui likes to have me over there!”

“He does not!” Jin Ling argued. “You’re too loud for him!”

“Like you aren’t!”

“You—mm!”

“Mm? Mm!”

“Go back to your punishments.” Lan Wangji ordered again, sounding calm. Lan Sizhui let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding, calming his own mind and continuing his punishment. He heard Jin Ling and Wei Wuxian settling back again and then there was silence for two more, blessed hours. He did not take a break until Hanguang-Jun reminded him to do so.

“Lan Sizhui, take a break.” Lan Sizhui’s breath hitched at the familiar, caring words, even if the tone was expressionless. He got out of position a little less gracefully than usual and grunted. For a few minutes, he just sat there, letting the pain take over. While he was quite used to this kind of punishment, and his arm strength was as high as any other Lan disciples, he never had to do such severe punishment for days in a row, much less without any sleep or food to regain his strength.

How painful the fall from grace was, he marveled with his eyes closed. Just days ago, he had been the head disciple of the GusuLan Sect, a prime example, Hanguang-Jun’s pride. Now, he wasn’t more than a common disciple who got into trouble again and again, breaking rules left and right, without a family. He truly deserved such harsh punishment. No, it wasn’t nearly enough. For breaking into the library, he should’ve been beaten, not just added four more copies to his already sentenced punishment.

“Lan Sizhui.” The voice of his adoptive father was loud in the silence embracing Lan Sizhui. He took a deep breath around the lump in his throat, standing to get back to his position.

“Yes, Hanguang-Jun.” He bowed, then turned to prepare, but Hanguang-Jun stopped him.

“Leave for an hour. Eat and rest, then return and continue your punishment.” Lan Sizhui paused. It was something Hanguang-Jun would’ve said to Lan Yuan, his son, not Lan Sizhui, the troublesome nobody.

“Hanguang-Jun?” He asked, confused.

“Address me properly. You may leave now.” Was his only answer. He hesitated, looking over his messy station while Lan Jingyi’s was tidy and put away like he left last night. Before they broke into the Room of Forbidden Books. He did not deserve a break.

“But—”

“Lan Sizhui.” The tone was sharp and he realized his mistake.

“Yes.” He nodded quietly, grateful. He knelt and with heavy arms, he put his things in order before he left the back room. Wei Wuxian and Jin Ling were sitting side-by-side, their tables close under one of the windows. Neither of them were writing, brushes in hand above the inkpots. Lan Sizhui’s vision blurred as he turned towards his adoptive father and bowed deeply. “I am grateful.” He said quietly. Hanguang-Jun just gave a barely-there nod of acknowledgement and Lan Sizhui bowed curtly to the other two, then turned and left.

His first trip was to the kitchens. Even if he was not hungry, he knew part of his fatigue was due to him using up most of his spiritual energy in order not to require food. He got a bowl of soup, some bread and a pot of tea. He took them back to his rooms, then sat in front of the window to meditate. He allowed himself a stick of incense's time, then rose and left the room. He went over to Lan JingYi's, but his knock was unanswered. He wondered where his friend was.

Heading back to the library, he got the chance to ask ZeWu-Jun about it. The Sect Leader was walking in the opposite direction in front of him, and as they neared each other, now feeling a little better, Lan SiZhui stopped to get out of the way and bow to him. ZeWu-Jun stopped as well.

"Lan SiZhui, why are you out? Aren't you supposed to be in punishment?"

"Ah, ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun actually gave me an hour to regroup." That seemed to surprise ZeWu-Jun.

"Hanguang-Jun?" He asked with some hesitation in his voice.

"Second Young Master Lan?" Lan SiZhui prompted and ZeWu-Jun hummed thoughtfully.

"I see." He nodded.

"ZeWu-Jun, if it's not inappropriate to ask..." He hesitated, but ZeWu-Jun nodded to him encouragingly. "May I ask where Lan JingYi is?" He tried not to show how worried he was, but it probably failed. Once Lan JingYi told him he had a face where he always looked concerned.

"He had been sent to Moling." That shocked Lan SiZhui, and he looked at ZeWu-Jun with wide eyes, lips parting in surprise. "Ah, this reminds me. He wanted us to deliver a message. He was quite... desperate about this message reaching you, so I'm hoping you can make more sense of it. He said to tell you: *'The ghost we've found is of the past. Ask about Jin Ling's parents.'*" He paused as he watched Lan SiZhui's confused face. His parents? But they all knew what happened to Jin Ling's parents. The ghost they've found? They haven't found any ghosts! "Does that mean anything to you?" ZeWu-Jun asked curiously.

Lan SiZhui, realizing he had to go and he was taking ZeWu-Jun's precious time anyways, bowed as he said: "Thank you for relaying his message, ZeWu-Jun. I'm afraid I'm just as confused as you are, but if I figure it out, I'll let you know. Excuse my hurry, but my hour is almost up and I don't want to slack."

"Of course." ZeWu-Jun smiled at him, but paused, seemingly having something else to say. Lan SiZhui hesitated, wanting to wait him out. Then ZeWu-Jun asked quietly, serious: "Lan SiZhui... Although this time you haven't gotten into the Forbidden Room, I ask you to never try again. It is locked for a reason. Incredibly dangerous knowledge and artifacts are placed there."

"I know, ZeWu-Jun." He lowered his eyes, guilty. "I apologize for being so careless." ZeWu-Jun nodded and smiled at him.

“Go now, before WangJi gives you even more punishment.”

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui bowed, then after the acknowledging nod, he rushed away – as fast as the rules allowed anyhow. When he arrived, the library pavilion was empty. There was a volume on top of Hanguang-Jun’s table he hadn’t returned, so he picked it up to do so, only to notice a piece of paper on top. It was folded once, his name on top of it. He opened it.

*“I’m going to try talk to ZeWu-Jun about Lan JingYi. Hopefully your dinner offer still stands, we’ll talk then. Jin Ling.”*

Lan SiZhui folded back the note and put it back in his sleeve before returning the book in its place, then he headed to the punishment room. Long hours of copying awaited him.

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As promised, not long after Lan SiZhui returned to his rooms, there was a knock on the door. He opened it and smiled at Jin Ling as the other boy carried two bowls of soup, a loaf of bread and a set of tea. They settled around Lan SiZhui’s table before they began to converse.

“Sect Leader Jin, have you found anything?” Lan SiZhui asked as he served tea for the two of them.

“No.” Jin Ling scoffed. “I didn’t get the chance to talk to ZeWu-Jun at all. Hanguang-Jun forced me and Wei WuXian to attend the afternoon lectures.”

“Hm. I did run into ZeWu-Jun as I was returning to the library.”

“And?!” Jin Ling leaned forward eagerly. “Why didn’t you start with that?!”

“It was truly brief and I thought Sect Leader Jin might’ve had the chance to converse with him for longer than I had. However, I do know where Lan JingYi is.”

“Where?” Jin Ling asked eagerly. Lan SiZhui wondered if he realized how much he cared about the other boy.

“He was sent to Moling for some reason.”

“Moling?” Jin Ling frowned. “Why didn’t he bid his goodbyes then?”

“I don’t know, and it is strange that he was sent out while he still had punishment. If his family was still alive, I’d say they had something happened to them and he had to rush to them, but...”

“Lan JingYi lived in Moling?” Jin Ling frowned at him. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“He should’ve until he turned thirteen, but his parents died before that, and then ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster offered to raise him here with us, who grew up in the Cloud Recesses.”



“Maybe he still has some kind of uncle or something like that living in Moling.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Most of the Sect Leader’s family lives in the Cloud Recesses or Gusu. Only distant relatives moved away, and as far as I know, Lan JingYi’s father had been the only one who moved to Moling.”

“So weird...” Jin Ling looked at him up and down with a scoff.

“Sect Leader Jin?” Lan SiZhui prompted when he didn’t elaborate. Jin Ling shook his head.

“I guess with Hanguang-Jun being so... *cold*, I never expected that you’ve been really raised as his son, with cousins and such.” Lan SiZhui looked down.

“Until this day, or the day they still remembered me... In Gusu, people still believed I was his illegitimate son, so did many people from other Sects. Our Sect’s rules...” He trailed off, sure that Jin Ling wasn’t interested in the reasons, and shook his head. “We don’t bother to correct people who assume, but I have been introduced to the Sect as an orphan Hanguang-Jun took in.” He shrugged.

“So cold!” Jin Ling frowned. “Just because he’s too prideful to have such a scandal, he’s ashamed to call you his real son?!” He fumed.

“Ah, Sect Leader Jin, it’s not like that at all!” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I asked Hanguang-Jun the same question once. He told me it wouldn’t be respectful to my ancestors if he claimed to be my father. At the time I didn’t know what he meant. Now I do.”

“He still changed your name.” Jin Ling scoffed. “Surely, he doesn’t respect the Wen Sect all that much.”

“But Sect Leader Jin, you said it yourself. The Wen name is quite undignified since the war. Like this, I could have a life without prejudices made against me.”

“I guess.” Jin Ling grumbled, clearly not wanting to admit he was too quick to judge. There was a pause, then he turned back to Lan SiZhui. “So, what else had ZeWu-Jun said?”

“He relayed a message from Lan JingYi.”

“What was it?”

“He said: *‘The ghost we’ve found is of the past. Ask about Jin Ling’s parents.’*”

“Well, that doesn’t make a lot of sense.” He frowned. “What does that mean? What ghost have you found?”

“We haven’t found any ghosts.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“And what about my parents? Who should we ask? You know as much as I do.” He paused, seemingly something coming to mind.

“What is it, Sect Leader Jin?”

“Nothing.” Jin Ling was too quick to shake his head and he didn’t look at Lan SiZhui. He wanted to ask, but he didn’t want to pry. “I don’t think it’s related anyways.” Jin Ling muttered and Lan SiZhui accepted that answer, because he couldn’t do much else. Jin Ling picked up his bowl. “Let’s eat. Our meal will go cold.” And dug in.

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Lan SiZhui was still contemplating Lan JingYi’s earlier words on his way to the library to continue his punishment when a disciple stopped him just before entering.

“Brother, Second Young Master Lan requested that this morning you join the Lan disciples during the Introduction Ceremony.” He said with a respectful bow. Lan SiZhui blinked at him, then quickly bowed.

“Yes.” He said, then turned around and went back towards the Lanshi. He pondered if it was because Hanguang-Jun wanted to show off their first disciple, then he remembered he wasn’t anymore, not since no one remembered it. The request was all the stranger for that fact.

The Ceremony didn’t start yet, many disciples standing just outside the Lanshi, conversing, while the GusuLan disciples were already inside, sitting in an orderly fashion. Before he could join them, he spotted Jin Ling. He stood amongst some other Jin Sect disciples, a little to the side, looking bored and offended at the same time.

“Ah, that’s him, Lan SiZhui!” He heard from his other side and looked over where Wei WuXian waved at him from a group. Next to him was Sect Leader Jiang and Sect Leader Nie as well as some other disciples. Lan SiZhui watched, puzzled, how young they all looked. How strange! And what were they doing on the Introduction Ceremony? Surely, the seniors needn’t to be present. He bowed to them from where he stood. He would go over, but Lan QiRen was already seated, working on what seemed like writing letters. He didn’t want to delay more.

“Lan SiZhui, come here, I want to introduce you!” Wei WuXian kept waving at him, but then Jin Ling stepped up to him, and frowned at his uncle.

“Why would he want to associate with you?” He called over with his usual sneer. “He keeps better company!”

“Oh yeah?” Wei WuXian crossed his arms, stepping closer as to not shout across the yard, his group following behind like obedient children. “And that would be you?”

“If you must know, yes.” Jin Ling answered arrogantly.

“Young Master Jin, Senior Wei, please do not argue. I like spending time with either of you equally.”

“Why are you calling him Senior?” Jiang WanYin scoffed. “Isn’t he a little young for it?”

“Jiang Cheng, stop it, I enjoy it!” Wei WuXian grinned. “It’s a show of respect, isn’t it, Lan SiZhui?”

“Why would he respect a madman like you?” Jin Ling huffed, rolling his eyes. The Jin disciples’ attention was slowly brought over as well.

“Why am I mad?” Wei WuXian frowned. But Jin Ling wasn’t focused on his words, but around his chest. As Lan SiZhui followed his gaze, he noticed Suibian clutched in his hand as well. Jin Ling glared at him for a few seconds too long. “What, are you admiring my sword?” Wei WuXian asked with a grin, lifting Suibian to be seen by most. “Where is yours, Young Master Jin?”

“Why are you calling him Young Master?” Someone from the Jin Sect asked, stepping forward. “He’s just a disciple, not a Young Master.” Jin Ling’s eyes widened at that and his nostrils flared in anger as he glared at the disciple, his hand clenching in an empty fist.

“What? If he isn’t a Young Master, why does Lan SiZhui keep calling him that?” Wei WuXian frowned.

“Wei brother, doesn’t he call you Senior as well without reason?” Nie HuaiSang asked from over Wei WuXian’s shoulder. He only turned his ear towards the Head-shaker but otherwise didn’t acknowledge him. He had his lips pursed, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“That’s right.” Jin Ling got over his anger quicker than Lan SiZhui anticipated. “He’s calling me that out of respect. He calls you that in mocking!”

“Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui glared at him. “Do not lie.”

“I know, I know.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “*Do not breathe too loudly.*”

“There isn’t even a rule like that.” Wei WuXian snorted at that.

“There sure is!” Jin Ling argued with newfound heat. “He told me himself!”

“Young Masters Jin and Wei, please do not argue. It is actually unnecessary and the Introduction Ceremony starts soon. These disciples should go and take our seats then prepare ourselves for the long day ahead of us.”

“Wei brother, didn’t you say he was a fun rulebreaker?” Sect Leader Nie asked quietly hiding behind a folding fan.

“Who told you that?!” Jin Ling glared at Sect Leader Nie. “Did he tell you that? He was lying!” He shook his head as if disappointed they were gossiping about him, which Lan SiZhui appreciated, until... “Lan SiZhui is the number one disciple of the GusuLan Sect.” Lan SiZhui looked down in shame. He wasn’t anymore, and not just because people forgot it, but also his punishment should serve as evidence for that. People didn’t know what to say to that, looking at each other unsurely. They quieted down and Jin Ling’s face brightened as he tugged at Lan SiZhui’s robes, who turned to look what he’d been looking at.

“ZeWu-Jun.” He was quick to bow deeply as the others did as well. Not having much patience as usual, Jin Ling was the first out of position and moving towards ZeWu-Jun. He stopped before him.

“ZeWu-Jun, can you tell us, what happened to Lan JingYi?” He asked eagerly. Used to doing damage control, Lan SiZhui was the first to move after the question.

“ZeWu-Jun, forgive this humble disciple for his impatience. We’ve just been wondering why he was sent away and hoped you could give us some insight.” He bowed. ZeWu-Jun’s mouth opened, then he looked over their audience, pressed his lips together and shook his head.

“Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling, I’m afraid it is not a good time to converse about such topics. Please take your seats inside and let us start the Introductions.” Jin Ling sent Lan SiZhui a look full of impatience and annoyance, but for once, he didn’t argue but headed inside. Lan SiZhui hesitated to enter when he saw the two Sect Leaders take a seat inside along with Wei WuXian. Surely, they weren’t attending to lectures dedicated to children?!

Anyhow, his seat was emptily waiting for him, so he joined the Lan disciples, two seats behind Hanguang-Jun – why was he sitting with the disciples? – and three seats away from Jin Ling. On his other side, to the right, Wei WuXian sat in front of Sect Leader Jiang. They were all also wearing GusuLan guest disciple robes. So strange! He shook his head at Jin Ling’s questioning look when their eyes met, then they were hushed as the senior disciple in the front announced:

“The Lan Sect of Gusu is saluting!” Lan SiZhui stood with the other disciples, then with Hanguang-Jun’s lead they stood in formation in front of Grandmaster Lan.

“I’m Lan WangJi from the Lan Sect of Gusu. Greetings to the Grandmaster and all guest disciples.” Hanguang-Jun bowed to the Grandmaster, along with the Lan disciples respectfully, then they turned first to the left, then to the right to repeat the action. At the end, they turned forward again and bowed to Sect Leader Lan as well. ZeWu-Jun nodded to them with a proud smile playing on his lips. The Lan Sect returned behind their tables. There was a pause, when a shuffle of feet could be heard outside. Lan SiZhui wondered who was late from the ceremony.

“Lan SiZhui!” He heard a faint, restrained whisper. He subtly looked over at Jin Ling, but he was staring ahead. He looked to his other side, but everybody was facing the front of the room. He looked over there as well, only to see the senior brother hesitate in calling out the next Sect, Lan QiRen’s eyebrows furrowed disapprovingly and ZeWu-Jun’s confused expression. He looked behind himself.

“Lan SiZhui!” There! Just outside the room, dressed in journey-dusted robes, somewhat disheveled stood Lan JingYi, hunched, as if he was trying to hide but there was nothing to hide behind. Once Lan SiZhui saw him, he made impatient gestures to him, beckoning him. Lan SiZhui glared and faintly shook his head, turning back to the Grandmaster, who kept glaring at Lan JingYi.

“Lan SiZhui!” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, turning again. He mouthed:

“Later!” But Lan JingYi shook his head, kept gesturing.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Lan QiRen demanded when it became evident Lan JingYi would not leave by himself. One of the two senior disciples in front of him shared a look with his partner before stepping forward, silently heading towards Lan JingYi. By then, everyone was stealing glances over their shoulders. Lan SiZhui felt his face aflame with shame at being the subject of Lan JingYi’s misbehavior.

“Brother, you’re disturbing the Introduction Ceremony. Is it an emergency?” Lan SiZhui could only hear the gentle and quiet words because he was standing in the back. He caught Jin Ling looking over questioning, his position blocking his vision from the door. Lan SiZhui discreetly shook his head to signal: they shouldn’t pay Lan JingYi any mind just now, not until the Ceremony was over.

“Not by your standards. But I need to talk to Lan SiZhui about something—” Lan JingYi started, but then his mouth did not open anymore and Lan SiZhui looked over at Hanguang-Jun with wide eyes. His adoptive father’s head turned back towards the Grandmaster, who, after a moment, acknowledged his action with a nod of gratitude.

“The Jin Sect of Lanling is saluting!” The other senior disciple carried on once everyone’s attention was brought away from the commotion outside. Jin Ling followed the pretentious Young Master of his to the center of the room in front of Lan QiRen. Then the pretentious Young Master started talking and it was as if air froze in the room for three disciples, Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi.

“I’m Jin ZiXuan from the Jin Sect of Lanling. I’m here to visit the Grandmaster.” And he bowed along with the disciples standing behind him, except one of them. Jin Ling’s eyes widened impossibly, his mouth fell open and he stared at the man wearing his father’s name like he was seeing a ghost.

“How dare you?!” He exclaimed suddenly and Lan SiZhui’s heart stopped. Everybody turned towards Jin Ling, who was trembling, panting like he couldn’t get enough air into his lungs. “How... How dare you?!” He cried out again, hands clutching for a weapon he did not possess anymore.

“Jin Sect of Lanling!” Lan QiRen exclaimed, rising from his seat. “What is the meaning of this?”

“How dare you mock my father’s name?!” There was a vein in Jin Ling’s neck that stood out sharply now. His palms were bleeding from where he clenched his fists so hard, his nails broke skin. “Explain yourself!” Jin Ling glared at the Young Master with so much hatred in his eyes, Lan SiZhui believed he could kill him if he had a weapon.

“What do you mean by that?” Young Master Jin asked calmly, gently, but coldly.

“Don’t you have any shame?!” He snapped. “Don’t you know how Jin ZiXuan died, don’t you know who—”

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi suddenly exclaimed, lips bleeding from where he forced the spell to break. Everyone looked towards the Lan disciple who rushed up to the other boy. He took hold of Jin Ling’s arms, looking in his eyes. Jin Ling pushed him away.

“Get out of my way! I’m going to kill him!”

“Se—Young Master Jin!” Lan SiZhui stepped forward as well, feeling eyes trained on him, especially Hanguang-Jun’s sharp ones. He ignored them.

“You dare to stop me?!” Jin Ling glared at the two of them.

“It’s not that, Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi hurried to explain. “But the Young Master Jin wasn’t actually mocking your father! It just happens he has the same name as he did!”

“I don’t care!”

“Well you should!” The conviction in Lan JingYi’s voice made Lan SiZhui pause. His earlier message came to mind.

*‘The ghost we’ve found is of the past. Ask about Jin Ling’s parents.’* The ghost they’ve found... Ghost... *Inquiry! Spring Again!* Ask about Jin Ling’s parents... He looked over at Sect Leader... No. *Young Master Jiang.* He was not Sect Leader. Nor was anyone else in the room except ZeWu-Jun. Who never went into seclusion, which is why he was present... on the Introduction Ceremony of the GusuLan lectures that were held only once every generation...

Lan SiZhui made a choked noise, which drew Jin Ling’s attention away from Lan JingYi. Lan SiZhui glared at Lan JingYi in shock. How did he figure it out?! But first things first. Lan SiZhui stepped up to Jin Ling and with a quick draw of his spiritual energy, touching his forehead with a finger, he knocked him right out. As Jin Ling fell, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi caught him.

Lan JingYi pulled one of his arms over his shoulder and sharing a silent look they were practiced in from night-hunts, Lan JingYi nodded to Lan SiZhui. He has got Jin Ling, now it was time to explain to their audience. Lan SiZhui turned towards the Grandmaster and bowed as deep as he could.

“Grandmaster Lan, Sect Leader Lan, Young Master Jin, everyone, we deeply apologize for the behavior of Jin Ling from the Jin Sect of Lanling.” He paused. “The truth is, this humble disciple lost his father in a gruesome way and it had left a deep wound in his heart. He does not have control over his reaction when something reminds him of such a traumatic event.” He turned to Jin ZiXuan, still bowing. “Young Master Jin, his father’s name was—” *‘Couldn’t be ZiXuan as well, too suspicious—’* “Jin SuXuan. When Young Master Jin said his name, it sounded a lot like this disciple’s fathers and he was lashing out without a thought.”

“How tragic!”

“What a temperamental boy!” He heard whispers from around the room. The moment ZeWu-Jun stepped forward, everyone hushed. Lan SiZhui was still bowing, now he turned to ZeWu-

Jun, who stopped in front of him.

“Lan SiZhui, it appears to me that you and Lan JingYi had dealt with this issue before.” He said kindly and Lan SiZhui nodded eagerly. Lan JingYi remained silent for once, thankfully. “In this case, I’ll leave the Jin disciple in your care. Young Master Jin.” ZeWu-Jun turned to Jin ZiXuan. “Please, allow us to care for your disciple while the Introduction Ceremony is underway. After it is over, please join me and Grandmaster Lan for tea to discuss this incident.”

Young Master Jin looked over at the three boys, contemplating, then with expressionless eyes, he nodded to ZeWu-Jun. Lan SiZhui bowed his head again, then turned. He quickly pulled Jin Ling’s other arm around his shoulder and together, they carried him out of the Lanshi.

“Where to?” Lan JingYi asked in a hushed tone.

“My rooms.” Lan JingYi nodded at the answer and they brought Jin Ling over. It took a little coordination to get him inside and lay him on Lan SiZhui’s bed, but once they managed it, Lan SiZhui let out a deep sigh.

“Lan SiZhui—” Lan JingYi started, but he shook his head at the other boy. He went over his table pulling a handkerchief out and passed it to Lan JingYi, who looked surprised, then realized what it was meant for and tapped his still bleeding lips. Lan SiZhui in the meantime found a calming incense, put up silencing talismans and prepared a bowl of water. Once he was done, he stepped up to Jin Ling and opened his meridians, withdrawing his own spiritual energy from Jin Ling’s body to relieve the pressure and have him wake up. It took a few seconds, then Jin Ling shot up in bed eyes wide, mouth gaping open.

“You—!” He looked around, surprised not to see the Lanshi around him anymore. He then glared at Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi. “You two, how dare you stop me from—”

“From killing your own father?” Lan JingYi asked, raising arrogant eyebrows. Jin Ling’s furrowed as he scoffed at him.

“The man who mocked—”

“Nobody mocked your family!” Lan JingYi huffed, annoyed. “If you’d just listen, you’d know what we mean!”

“Fine!” The boy snapped. “Explain yourself then! I’m waiting!” He crossed his arms.

“Perhaps we should all calm down and sit first.” Lan SiZhui said as he settled at the table. Lan JingYi wordlessly joined him while Jin Ling went huffing and puffing. The usual grace from taking a seating position was missing, but he sat still.

“So?” He crossed his arms again, not waiting even a minute. Lan SiZhui sighed but looked to Lan JingYi as well, waiting for an explanation.

“Right.” Lan JingYi nodded, looking around at the silencing charms that held strongly. “So, yesterday, after ZeWu-Jun took me away, we went to the Grandmaster. He told me that he looked into what I said the other night about my parents. He wanted me to confirm the names. When I did, he said it was curious that ZeWu-Jun’s cousin just got married, but they did not have a child. That confused me, so I asked who that cousin was. And Lan QiRen said it was Lan ChenGuang, who married Su ZhuoXuan!”

Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened. “Your parents?” He asked breathlessly. Lan JingYi nodded.

“But how could they have got married?” Jin Ling frowned. “They’re dead.” He paused, then shook his head. “Whatever, I don’t care about your parents!” He glared. “Tell us instead why you stopped me in the Lanshi!”

“I’m about to, it’s related!” Lan JingYi snapped, irritated. “Would you shut up and let me talk?”

“Young—Sect Leader Jin, this is important. Please.” Lan SiZhui looked at him earnestly and Jin Ling huffed, looking away as if he wasn’t interested in what Lan JingYi had to say. “What happened then?” Lan SiZhui turned back to Lan JingYi.

“Right, after he told me this, I didn’t believe him at first. But then he said he sent a message to Lan ChenGuang, asking him about a wayward son. Of course, my father had no knowledge of such things, nor any associations with women before he married my mother. He requested to see the one who claimed to be his son in person!”

“That’s why you went to Moling.” Lan SiZhui realized. Lan JingYi nodded. Jin Ling pretended to be uninterested but his face betrayed he cared.

“When Grandmaster told me that my father wanted to see me in Moling, my reaction was to say no, but then Grandmaster said it is not up to me. That he wanted to get to the bottom of this peculiar case. He called forth two senior disciples who were to escort me there.”

“That’s why you never came to tell us where you went?” Jin Ling frowned. Lan JingYi nodded.

“As soon as Grandmaster declared his wishes I was taken away. By that time, I realized something.” He paused. “I recognized the two brothers Lan QiRen sent me off with.”

“And that’s interesting how?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “You two know everyone here.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shook their heads.

“In the past week the only ones we recognized were Hanguang-Jun, ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster, from our Sect.” Lan JingYi said. “But then I saw the two brothers, whom I got to know to be high-ranking senior cultivators. Now they were common disciples hosting me to Moling.”

“Was it Lan JunYu and Lan SiCheng?” Lan JingYi nodded at Lan SiZhui’s question. No wonder then that Lan JingYi noted them.



“What about them is so special?” Jin Ling frowned, understanding there was another question in Lan SiZhui’s he didn’t ask.

“Lan JunYu had lost his left hand during the Bloodbath. Lan SiCheng lost an eye during Sunshot Campaign.” Lan JingYi told him, then paused for effect before saying: “Now they looked like the war never happened!”

“I don’t get it.” Jin Ling frowned. “Did they heal themselves?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “They needn’t to. Because as of now, they have yet to get injured.”

“I still don’t understand.” Jin Ling frowned. Lan SiZhui shook his head and turned back to Lan JingYi.

“That’s how you figured it out and sent that message with ZeWu-Jun.”

“Yes.” Lan JingYi looked down. “I could barely tell him before I was dragged away, so I didn’t have time for something more detailed. I didn’t want to be obvious as well, in case ZeWu-Jun figures it out.”

“What did you figure out?” Jin Ling asked, annoyed he had not yet.

“You’ll get it in a moment.” Lan JingYi told him as he continued. “I wasn’t entirely sure of it, so I went along to Moling and didn’t escape back to Gusu. In Moling, however, I met a young man and a young woman, recently married, without a child.” He had a small, sad smile on his face. “They asked me who I was, why I claimed to be their son. I told them it must be a mistake because I didn’t know *them*, and that my parents died when I was eight.”

“So, they weren’t your parents returning from the dead like Wei WuXian?” Jin Ling scoffed at him. “Why are you boring us with this tale? Get to the point!”

“That is the point, Young Mistress!” Lan JingYi grinned. “They weren’t my parents revived from the dead. They *were my parents!*”

“You’re not making any sense.” Jin Ling frowned, looking him up and down, as if wondering what was wrong with him.

“And you aren’t listening!” Lan JingYi clicked his tongue. “They were my parents. No revival involved. They were freshly married, but my mother had never birthed a child yet!” He looked at Jin Ling earnestly. “Don’t you get it?”

“Young Master Wei is not my senior.” Lan SiZhui added. “He is, in fact... If I remember correctly, seventeen at this time. Your uncle, Jiang WanYin is not Sect Leader yet, nor is Nie HuaiSang. Lan JingYi and I are to be born in a year or so.” He looked over at Lan JingYi, who nodded. “And the Young Master Jin who carries Suihua like it belongs to him, does so, because... It does.”

“Wha—What are you implying?” Lan SiZhui saw realization slowly drawing on Jin Ling, and he gave him another push.

“It is not that they do not remember us because we’ve performed a spell that wiped their memories. It is they do not remember because at this time, we have not yet even been born.”

Jin Ling was silent for a long time, looking down, then with wide eyes, he stared at Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi.

“We’re in the past?!” He exclaimed.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Jin Ling’s “father’s” name: (金)俗(轩) (Jīn) Sù(Xuān): “vulgar/custom/common”  
(Chose this because it sounds kinda easy to hear it wrong.)

## Guilt III.

“We’re in the past.” Jin Ling repeated, still in shock. Lan SiZhui felt for him, for Lan JingYi as well. Lan JingYi, even though he seemed fine now, also lost his parents young. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what was worse – having to had known them and lost them or not even getting the chance.

He himself didn’t get the chance, but his situation was different than most, than Jin Ling’s as well. Ever since he could remember, his birth family had not been present in his life, so he never let himself really think about them. They died and a part of him would always be curious about them, how his life would’ve been if they were alive and raised him. But at the same time, he also felt that somehow, he... didn’t really care.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want them alive, of course he did, they were his family! But honestly, he had a complete life. He had his Sect and Hanguang-Jun and early then later Senior Wei and the Wen. He didn’t have much of his birth family left, but he honestly wouldn’t change it if it meant he never got to know the people he cherished in his life.

The situation they were in... He wondered if he could have both, his birth family back, getting to know his people, and also knowing Hanguang-Jun and Wei WuXian were there?

“How did that even happen?” Jin Ling looked around with wide eyes. Lan JingYi looked similarly dumbfounded and Lan SiZhui suspected his expression was quite telling as well. But upon the question, a solvable problem, he couldn’t help but slip into the routine he was so used to from night-hunts, from his training to figure it out and solve the mystery. Lan SiZhui nodded, at least he knew the answer to Jin Ling’s question, so they were off to a good start, he imagined.

“Remember what we’ve found during our research. As Lan JingYi said, very accurately, we’ve found ghosts of the past.”

“Did we?” Lan JingYi frowned. “I just said that to be mysterious.”

“But you were right anyways.” Lan SiZhui told him. “*Spring Again*, and the *Song of Winter* are both early versions of *Inquiry*. Remember the verse I’ve told you was part of ‘*Summoning*’?” Two nods. “That name is highly accurate. The stronger the verse, the stronger the summoning. Anyhow, from what I remember *Spring Again*, ‘*Summoning*’ is carefully woven into the song. It is so subtle I hadn’t realized what it was until the other night. The only verse that is recognizable is the one I’ve played in the Forbidden Room.”

“But we didn’t put any spiritual energy into our play!” Lan JingYi argued. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“Yes, that also baffles me. While *Inquiry* is a highly technical cultivation, even it requires some spiritual energy to work.”

“And if someone... did use spiritual energy?” Jin Ling asked, looking down at the table. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“If someone used enough spiritual energy to activate the spell, it should’ve indeed worked. While I do not know how *Spring Again* specifically works, if I can spend enough time studying it, knowing what spell it casts, I’d be able to reverse the effects. The only problem is, if we didn’t use spiritual energy while playing, what could’ve activated it?”

“Alright, don’t be mad!” Jin Ling suddenly sprang on his feet, not meeting their eyes. “I was trying to see if I could sneak Fairy in, I didn’t mean to...”

“You—!” Lan JingYi jumped up as well, glaring at Jin Ling angrily. Seeing his hold tighten on his sword, Lan SiZhui was quick to jump in.

“Young Master Jin, while that action was very irresponsible, thank you for telling us, so we can work with all the information.”

“Lan SiZhui, don’t thank him! It’s his fault we’re stuck here now!”

“Lan JingYi, it is all of our faults actually. While Young Master Jin activated the spell, it was you who brought it out of the Forbidden Room, and it was I, who played it.” He paused, hoping Lan JingYi understood. “We’re equally responsible. Passing the blame does not help our situation.”

“That’s right!” Jin Ling jumped at that, glaring at Lan JingYi. “You stole the book!”

“Yeah, but you tried to summon your stupid dog! You know he couldn’t have entered even if pets were allowed, Cloud Recesses are defended against spirits!”

Lan SiZhui wondered if they even heard his last sentence or just choose to ignore it.

“Enough!” He snapped at last, and two, wide-eyed boys looked back at him. “Sit down. We need to formulate a plan, not argue about who’s to blame.”

“Lan SiZhui is right, as always. Stop arguing!” Jin Ling said as he sat down gracefully. Lan JingYi made a face at him but settled as well.

“Firstly,” Lan SiZhui started after taking a moment to calm himself, “we need to address what just happened during the Introduction Ceremony. Young Master Jin.” He turned to the boy. “We told everyone your father had died a gruesome death and you were traumatized by it. His name was Jin SuXuan, which is similar to Jin ZiXuan, which is why you thought he was claiming his name.”

“But that wasn’t my father’s name, I—!”

“Young Mistress Jin, Lan SiZhui broke the rules and lied on your behalf. Don’t be ungrateful!” Lan JingYi inserted, irritated. Lan SiZhui nodded his thanks, then turned back to Jin Ling.

“This is the tale we told. Please forgive my boldness.” He bowed while sitting. Jin Ling heaved a sigh and nodded.

“Fine. I’ll accept it.”

“Now, I imagine the Ceremony will soon be over and ZeWu-Jun will want to see us so we could apologize, especially the two of you.”

“Why me?!” Lan JingYi protested.

“Because you disturbed the Ceremony and broke Hanguang-Jun’s punishment.”

“I was trying to warn you so what happened wouldn’t!” Lan SiZhui was trained to have patience, but even his wasn’t endless.

“Please, Lan JingYi, just accept it.”

“Fine.” Lan JingYi made a face after a pause.

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui took a deep breath. “Now, we should, under no circumstances reveal where we’re from.”

“Why not?” Jin Ling frowned. “Don’t you want me to meet my parents?!”

“If we reveal we traveled through time, what do you think their first question would be?”

“I imagine it would be: ‘How?’” Lan JingYi said, then his eyes widened. He said urgently: “We cannot tell them! No matter what time we’re in, we’d be thrown out in an instant!”

“What does it matter?!” Jin Ling glared at Lan JingYi. “We’re not at home, what are you afraid of?!”

“Well, do you want to go home?” Lan JingYi asked him and Jin Ling huffed, looking away.

“What if I don’t?” He glanced at Lan JingYi from the corner of his eyes.

“Sect Leader Jin, we do not know how our presence might affect the future.” Lan SiZhui said. “What if because of us, you’re never born?”

“What...” Jin Ling trailed off, falling into deep thought. “You... You mean that’s a possibility?”

“A very real one indeed.” Lan SiZhui nodded seriously. “We shouldn’t meddle with these times and we should return home as soon as possible.”

“Why?” Lan JingYi asked suddenly. At their look, he clarified: “I mean, if we could avoid... so many things, shouldn’t we?” Lan JingYi asked a bit more reserved. “We could prevent Wei WuXian becoming the YiLing Patriarch. Maybe even the war itself. Maybe we would be able to save many people who fell in the war.”

“It is not our place to disturb fate.” Lan SiZhui argued.

“But aren’t we responsible for it?” Lan JingYi tilted his head to the side. “If we have this knowledge and we could do good with it, why shouldn’t we? Who are we to decide what people’s fate should be?”

“Precisely.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “We shouldn’t be the ones to say certain people should not have died.”

“I thought helping people was righteous.” Jin Ling joined Lan JingYi’s side. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“These events... they’re of the past. They’ve already happened.”

“But now we could change them.”

“We would change some lives and ruin another. Who says some people would’ve met if it wasn’t for the war? What if Jin Ling or you, or me, we aren’t born unless the war happens?” To that, he got no answer. “I am not saying it for selfish reasons. Think. Our juniors, would they have been born if their parents never met?”

“They could still meet without the war.”

“Could they?” Lan SiZhui thought for a moment, then said: “Think about Jin Ling’s parents. Their marriage, if I remember correctly, was due to the Jiang Sect being in pieces after Lotus Pier had burned down and they needed to marry in order to strengthen the name of the Sect. If Lotus Pier never burns...” He left the rest unsaid.

“But hundreds of lives would be saved if it never burned down.” Lan JingYi told him. “Even in the Cloud Recesses! So many of our brothers would live!”

“I want to save them too.” Lan SiZhui said quietly, reaching over uncharacteristically to grip Lan JingYi’s arm, because he needed him to understand. “*I do.*” He said with as much conviction as he could gather. “But not on the future’s expense. We do not have the authority to decide this.”

“That’s bullshit!” Jin Ling stood and with a swipe of his hand he knocked off the vase of flowers off Lan SiZhui’s desk. “Who are you to tell me I can’t save my parents?! Who are you to decide who lives and who dies?! Isn’t that what you just preached, that it wasn’t *your place*?! Does it only work if *you’re* the one to benefit from it?!”

There was a knock on the door just then. Lan SiZhui looked up from where he’d lowered his eyes in the face of the angry words. He stood and delicately deactivated the silencing talismans, making them burn scentless and heatless before going over and opening the door. It was a senior disciple and Lan SiZhui bowed to him.

“Brother, ZeWu-Jun, Second Young Master Lan, the Grandmaster and Young Master Jin wishes to see you in the Lanshi now.”

“Thank you, brother.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. The disciple left, but before Lan SiZhui could say anything, Jin Ling huffed behind him and stormed out of the room, bumping into his shoulder as he passed him. Lan SiZhui shared a startled look with Lan JingYi as the other boy scrambled on his feet and together, they rushed after Jin Ling as much as the rules allowed.

“Young Master Jin, wait!” Lan JingYi called out.

“Don’t talk to me!” Jin Ling threw over his shoulder, headed to the Lanshi.

“Young Master Jin, please!” Lan SiZhui pleaded. Jin Ling was taking long strides and they had a hard time catching up.

“It is not your place, it is not our place, so whose place is it?!” Jin Ling didn’t slow. They got closer and closer to the main buildings. They passed disciples but the teens hardly noticed them.

“Fate’s!” Lan SiZhui argued almost breathlessly. “Young Master Jin, please slow down. Let’s talk about this calmly...” He looked around, realizing they were surrounded by curious onlookers. “And privately!”

“I am done talking to you!” Jin Ling came to a stop in front of the Lanshi. Its doors were closed and fewer disciples were around here, but they still turned their heads towards them. “The great Lan SiZhui, the righteous, prime and model disciple of the GusuLan Sect!” He sneered. “You’re just a coward!” Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes.

He never took confrontation well, in his sheltered life he hardly had to deal with it. He found, since he’d begun going on night-hunts, he had to deal with it more and more. He should’ve learned by now how not to cave back in the face of fury, yet he couldn’t deal with it. Usually, he had Lan JingYi by his side to defend him, but he felt the other’s hesitation now.

“You’re too cowardly to bring change. You’re so comfortable in your life, with your great and renowned family you would rather have people I and Lan JingYi care about *die*, just so you could keep living your life! What about *my* life?! What about *my* family?! I didn’t have one, why do *you* deserve one?!” He almost screamed his words as tears streamed down his face and Lan SiZhui felt selfish and guilty. “Wen dog!” He spat the words with so much disgust, Lan SiZhui had to close his eyes.

Nobody had ever called him that. He heard people say it with the uttermost disgust when talking about his birth Sect. He knew the horrible things Wen RuoHan did to deserve such a slur for his entire Sect. But he never heard anyone address another like that, like they weren’t even people, like Lan SiZhui wasn’t even a person.

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi raised his voice as well and his sword was unsheathed in seconds. “You’re going too far!”

“Am I?!” Jin Ling shouted desperately. None of them noticed the Lanshi’s doors opening. “Don’t you agree with me, Lan JingYi?! Didn’t you say we could save people, that we should save them?! Doesn’t that involve me, too?!”

“Of course, it does!” Lan JingYi exclaimed. “And I do agree, but Lan SiZhui had been nothing but kind to you, even though you bullied him so harshly! Does he really deserve your vile words?!”

“Am I wrong?!”

“Enough!” The three of them visibly flinched at Lan QiRen’s bellowing, furious voice. It took a moment for Lan JingYi to sheath his sword and another for Jin Ling to step away from the Lanshi’s doors. With trembling arms, Lan SiZhui managed to bow deeply. Next to him, he sensed Lan JingYi doing the same with jerky, angry movements. There was a long and silent pause. One could hear a feather drop. “Didn’t you have enough of your punishments yet?” Lan QiRen’s voice was quieter but his words held the same heat as before. There was another long pause.

“Jin Ling.” ZeWu-Jun’s calm and collected voice was balm to Lan SiZhui’s tormented soul. “We have hoped you’d be better by the time we called for you. If you need more time to calm down, please, return to your rooms to meditate.”

“Who wants to meditate?” Jin Ling’s usual words didn’t hold the usual heat. “I came to apologize, didn’t I?” He scoffed at Lan SiZhui. “ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun, Grandmaster Lan, Young Master Jin, I apologize—”

Hanguang-Jun’s quiet voice was whip in the silence. “Don’t apologize if you do not mean it.”

Jin Ling clicked his tongue and fell quiet.

“Jin Ling, you’re putting me in a very hard position right now.” ZeWu-Jun sighed sadly. “I understand you must be going through a hard time right now, but you should not lose your temper like you did just now.” Pause.

Of course, Lan SiZhui understood where Jin Ling’s frustration came from. He lost his parents in this war and because of that, he had to spend his life in the shadows of ghosts. He was expected to be a great cultivator like his uncle had been. He was expected to be royal like his father had been. He was expected to be caring like his mother had been.

All the while two men who did not know how to handle nor grief nor a child, raised him. In pity, nobody had the heart to scold a young child properly, which made him think he could get whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, however he wanted. There was hardly anyone telling him no. His elders failed him and he grew up believing that was how life was supposed to be like.

“Come.” ZeWu-Jun said in the end, tone troubled. The seniors turned and entered the Lanshi again, and Jin Ling followed after a pause.

The door behind them closed and they were instructed to sit. For a long minute nobody said anything, then ZeWu-Jun stepped forward.

“Firstly,” he started slowly, pacing evenly in front of the three teens, “the argument you just had. Was it meant for public ears?”



“No, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi said in unison. On Lan JingYi’s other side Jin Ling remained quiet. ZeWu-Jun nodded.

“Private matters should not be discussed in public. Especially not this heated. May I ask what the argument was about?” The three of them remained quiet. “I see.” He said quietly. After a while he sighed again, massaging his temples. Hanguang-Jun stepped forward.

“Brother?” He said questioningly, quietly.

“I am fine, WangJi.” He smiled. He turned back to the teens. “Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi. You’ve broken... several rules.”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” They said again.

“Jin Ling. Even though you’re not from the Lan Sect of Gusu, you should know better than losing your temper like that.” Jin Ling didn’t say anything, just swallowed and looked away. Lan JingYi sent him a sharp look but didn’t say anything. “I do not wish to overstep, but coming to the lectures as a guest disciple you’ve agreed to take punishment should you break the rules. You, along with Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shall receive fifty strikes with the board.”

“Of course, it does not mean you should neglect your remaining punishment for breaking into the library pavilion.” Lan QiRen didn’t sound surprised. “If any of you are seen slacking, you shall receive an even harsher punishment.”

“Yes, Grandmaster, ZeWu-Jun.” The Lan disciples chorused. Jin Ling remained quiet still.

“You may leave now. Go back to your rooms and meditate for the rest of the day. You shall receive your punishments tomorrow morning.” The three of them stood, and with Lan SiZhui’s lead, they all bowed before turning and leaving. Jin Ling didn’t even hesitate, he turned towards the guest quarters and stalked away.

“Lan SiZhui... He did not mean it.” Lan JingYi tried, but Lan SiZhui shook his head. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe that. He knew Jin Ling’s temper very well. He simply just didn’t want to talk or think.

“It’s fine, Lan JingYi. I need to meditate. We will talk tomorrow.” They shared a significant look, then nodded to each other before parting, each going to their respective rooms.

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Lan SiZhui came out of meditation a short while before dinner. Having practiced inedia, he wasn’t feeling hunger, but he was still restless after hours of meditation and knew he couldn’t avoid eating forever. He headed towards the dining hall.

With this new knowledge that they were not in their own time, he’d looked at the Cloud Recesses with new eyes. It was strange, seeing the buildings, so old and still standing proudly. Now that he knew what was different, he looked for the details he’d missed ignorantly all this time. He noticed that the trees outside the walls were taller, lusher than

those he'd gotten used to. The pebbles that had decorated the gardens between buildings were grayer and smaller, having been worn down with time. There were different paintings in classrooms and everything felt ancient around himself.

In the dining hall, strange, unfamiliar faces greeted him. They respected the GusuLan robes and forehead ribbon, so most disciples didn't question his person, but it still felt like he was standing out from them. Now, that he knew these people would either die during the war, move away, or grow up to be his seniors, he couldn't help but look for familiar features.

As Lan JingYi pointed out earlier, he discovered a few disciples whom he knew in the future, but looked so young now. They weren't a lot. In the Cloud Recesses, around two hundred disciples lived, and most were killed when Wen Xu burned the Cloud Recesses. It was no surprise he could only pinpoint about four disciples he knew in the future.

Even though everything felt different, everything was also the same, he noted. The GusuLan Sect was still the GusuLan Sect. There were individual tables in the dining hall, everyone sitting apart, not conversing but enjoying their food in silence. It was such a usual sight for such a peculiar situation.

Lan SiZhui took a trayful of the prepared food, the cooks coming and going as they filled bowls that had emptied, taking away dirty cutlery neatly set in piles on a table. He sat towards the front of the tables, where there were still places left, but found himself unable to gaze at the painting in front of them, like he usually did. He couldn't help his gaze flitting to the side, where one of his future teachers sat, so youthful and different than the man he knew in the future. The disciple must've sensed his lingering gaze and turned to him. He smiled at Lan SiZhui, who returned it, then the disciple turned back facing forward.

Lan SiZhui decided to concentrate on his food, because otherwise, he was going to make a fool out of himself, watching people shamelessly.

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Lan SiZhui returned to his rooms after dinner, but he still felt restless. The dinner and those new and old faces just managed to make him even more jittery. He was also quite troubled by his and his friends' earlier discussion. As he exited his rooms, his legs automatically took him towards the Hanshi.

It was often that he asked for wisdom from ZeWu-Jun. Hanguang-Jun traveled quite a lot, and whenever he was away Lan SiZhui always went to seek out his adoptive uncle. Lan XiChen was, while in appearance very similar, in personality quite different from his brother. Where Lan WangJi was lost for words, Lan XiChen always seemed to have an answer to everything. It wasn't that Hanguang-Jun wasn't knowledgeable, but, with the highest respects, Lan SiZhui knew him to be an awkward discussion partner. Lan XiChen was simply easier to talk to about personal problems than him, and even Lan WangJi was aware of that.

So, while he'd have loved to be in the presence of his adoptive father, Lan SiZhui knew he'd gain more insight about his own feelings from his adoptive uncle. He stopped in front of the Hanshi. The lights were on inside, and even though it was late, it wasn't curfew yet. Still, Lan SiZhui was hesitating. This ZeWu-Jun did not know him as well as he did in the future,

obviously. He'd not watched Lan SiZhui grow up, he did not know his personality well. Still, he was wise and kind.

With that thought in his mind, Lan SiZhui gently knocked on the door, then stepped back, head lowered in wait of an answer. There was a long pause, then he heard footsteps before the door of the Hanshi opened, ZeWu-Jun greeting him in more comfortable clothes, pure white unlike his preferred pale blue. Some of his hair ornament had been taken off, leaving a more discreet piece.

"ZeWu-Jun." Lan SiZhui bowed to him.

He was looking at Lan SiZhui with a kind but tired and confused expression. "Lan SiZhui. You're out late." He said softly. Lan SiZhui did not meet his eyes.

"It is before curfew. Should I go back..." He trailed off at ZeWu-Jun's shake of head.

"Is everything alright?"

"Ah, of course, ZeWu-Jun." He was quick to reassure. "I..." He hesitated. He knew ZeWu-Jun never minded his showing up late at the Hanshi when they were in Lan SiZhui's time, but he wasn't sure it was appropriate now that they weren't family – not yet anyways.

"Lan SiZhui?" ZeWu-Jun prompted.

"I know ZeWu-Jun does not remember me," he started, and Lan XiChen opened his mouth to probably protest or apologize for his lack of memories, "I truly don't mind!" He added quickly and ZeWu-Jun paused before sending him a grateful smile. "But in the past..." *'Future.'* "ZeWu-Jun often blessed me with his wisdom. I came here in hopes ZeWu-Jun would be so generous and give me consult." He bowed deeply. Lan XiChen paused for a long moment before he smiled softly, fondly.

"You flatter me with your words and for seeking me out of all people. I truly appreciate your trust in me." He paused again. It sounded like a rejection, so Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes, ready to part if ZeWu-Jun wished. Lan XiChen looked around the quiet main buildings. Night guards just began to settle in and there was still time until curfew. He nodded as if confirming something to himself, then stepped back. "Come in." Lan SiZhui's breath hitched.

It wasn't that he'd never been to the Hanshi before. He'd spent plenty of time inside with ZeWu-Jun when he was still a child – a child, not a young adult. And not as a stranger either. ZeWu-Jun wasn't as private as Hanguang-Jun as to never let anyone into his sleeping quarters, but it was mostly people he was close to whom were allowed in. He expected this conversation to be had outside, taking a short stroll.

He bowed respectfully and followed ZeWu-Jun in, pulling the doors closed. Lan XiChen offered him a seat at his desk, where tea was streaming from a pot and one cup. Now he lifted the pot and prepared another cup, which he placed in front of Lan SiZhui. It was so familiar Lan SiZhui let himself smile. The tea must've been ZeWu-Jun's favorite, a spicy blend from Lanling. Taking the first sip without comment as it was polite, he was surprised to taste a milder blend of loquat tea of Gusu.

“Is the tea not to your liking?” ZeWu-Jun tilted his head to the side, curious but not offended. Never offended.

“Mm. Gusu’s *Gentle Rest* tea is my favorite.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “It’s just...”

“Yes?”

“Has ZeWu-Jun ever tasted the tea called *Red Dawn* from Lanling?”

“I don’t think so.” ZeWu-Jun shook his head with a thoughtful look.

“It is fruity and spicy, a mix that is both sweet and biting. I believed ZeWu-Jun would have enjoyed it.”

“Thank you for the suggestion.” ZeWu-Jun seemingly memorized the name. “I’ll make sure to try some when I get the chance.” Lan SiZhui smiled and nodded. There was a pause, then ZeWu-Jun noted: “Lan SiZhui, I couldn’t help but notice you and Lan JingYi are quite close with the disciple Jin Ling.”

“We’re from the same generation.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Perhaps, formally. But he is much younger than you, isn’t he?”

“Almost by three years.” Lan SiZhui confirmed. “I was born in the middle of the winter while he was born at the end of fall.”

“I see.” Pause. “If I may be so bold, I am baffled by your friendship. You and Jin Ling, even Lan JingYi and him are very different in nature. While Lan JingYi is loud and unruly, there is an order to his chaos I’ve noticed. He seems like someone who barely ever breaks the rules. He dances on the edge quite a lot, speaking up but never out of turn, expressing his emotions but never severely, runs around without running. In my understanding, he’s an unconventional but good disciple of the Lan Sect. On the other hand, Jin Ling is...” He trailed off, so Lan SiZhui offered:

“Out of control?”

“Yes.” ZeWu-Jun seemed relieved at the given choice of words. He fell into thought before looking up at Lan SiZhui. “Lan SiZhui, with respect... what brought the three of you into such a close friendship?” Lan SiZhui looked down, biting his lips in thought.

Really, what was it? Was it the numerous night-hunts they’ve led together? Was it simply facing the same enemy, fighting side-by-side? Or perhaps their family associations? Were they even friends or just a team that worked well together?

“I think on the surface a lot of people misunderstand Jin Ling. I think a lot of people judge him too early. All his life people saw others in him. When they looked at him as a young child, they saw a pitiful orphan whose parents died tragically, and not *just* a child who needed to be raised into a man. I do not wish to speak ill of other people, but I think we were the first ones who did not care about all that. For us, he is not the son of... of a man and a woman who died tragically. For us, that is long gone history. We do not see a boy in him who is

supposed to become a great—" *Sect Leader* "man. We just see another boy, no matter what his title is. I don't think he's had that growing up." He looked up and realized he wasn't answering ZeWu-Jun's question, not really. Thinking for a moment, he shook his head.

"As for why we're friends... We've been through a lot together. Some family ties as well." He smiled. "We also enjoy each other's company a lot. While it might sound strange, I grew up in a very conservative family in the Cloud Recesses. I've never met someone so different. I think when Young Master Jin is not being arrogant, he is quite refreshing. Different, new..." He chanced a shy look at ZeWu-Jun, "fun." The Sect Leader smiled, the widest Lan SiZhui had seen since they've landed in this time. There was a pause where Lan SiZhui sipped from his tea and ZeWu-Jun seemed to take in what he'd said. In the end, it was ZeWu-Jun who broke the silence.

"I imagine this morning's argument was quite a lot." Lan SiZhui looked down. "The thing about human nature is that fights are inevitable. It is as universal as day and night. Sooner or later one must learn to accept relationships are not easy and effortless. They take a lot of work on both ends. We can't always rely on our bonds with people. They're important, blood relations, shared experiences and other outside forces that might bring us together, but they are not enough to make a relationship last."

"Yes, ZeWu-Jun." Lan SiZhui nodded. He was quiet for a moment, then sensing ZeWu-Jun was waiting for him to say something, he looked up. "About this morning..."

"You do not need to tell me what the argument was about." ZeWu-Jun shook his head. "It is a private matter between the three of you."

"ZeWu-Jun..." Lan SiZhui started, then halted. He didn't know how he should ask what he came here for. Lan XiChen let him take his time, refilling his cup and sipping quietly from his tea. "If a person... knows something that could save a lot of people... But it has unknown consequences to a lot of other people's lives..." He stopped and shook his head, feeling like he wasn't making any sense.

"Give me an example." ZeWu-Jun prompted him and Lan SiZhui was grateful for ZeWu-Jun trying to help him articulate his thoughts.

"There's... There's a battle." Lan SiZhui started hesitantly. ZeWu-Jun nodded to him encouragingly, none of that faraway look appearing on his face Lan SiZhui saw people look when the Wen war had been mentioned. Of course, in this time it never happened yet. Encouraged by that, he continued. "The battle is provoked by a series of events. The first one is a fight. There's a man who's believed to be evil but isn't. He's invited to an event, but the host of the event ambushes him. The host is killed but not by the evil man, but others do not know that. In the end, that host's death is the first offense and the battle breaks out."

Lan SiZhui paused and ZeWu-Jun was quiet for a moment before he nodded, signaling he was following Lan SiZhui's tale. "If someone could stop the host's death, he would undo the whole battle. Save lives. But there's a catch." Lan SiZhui blinked at his own words, realizing he was weaving the tale like he heard Wei WuXian do so many times. Shaking off his momentarily surprise, he continued: "The person who could stop the battle doesn't learn

about it until years after the fact when the dust had settled and the world has come to peace again.”

“How is he able to prevent the battle if he lives years later?” ZeWu-Jun furrowed his brows and Lan SiZhui realized how close he came to the truth.

“Ah, I don’t know.” He pretended to think. “Maybe he’s able to travel through time?”

“Travelling through time?” ZeWu-Jun frowned. “Interesting. Please, continue.”

“Right.” Lan SiZhui paused, not sure if he really should go into more details. “So, this person is supposedly able to travel through time. He could stop the battle, but by doing so, the people who he had known in the future are either never born or never learn the lesson the battle taught them.” He paused again. “Should the person go back to prevent the death of the host?”

“I see.” ZeWu-Jun hummed, looking down. “In this world,” he started after a few minutes, “if the battle never happened, how else would they have solved the problem? Would they have killed the evil man who wasn’t evil after all?” He smirked at that last words and Lan SiZhui felt embarrassed about needing to emphasize that, he just didn’t want to drag Wei WuXian’s name further down, even if they were in the past and nobody would know.

“Well, by my understanding, in the end he was just too angry not to fight.” Lan SiZhui said, remembering the tales he heard of the Bloodbath at Nightless City. “I think... I think the only way it could’ve ended was by a battle and the death of the evil man.”

“Is there no way to resolve their differences?”

“If the Se—if the evil man’s opponents would have held up their end of the bargain...”

“Bargain?” Lan XiChen tilted his head to the side in confusion.

“Ah, right. The evil man is offered a deal after the death of the host. His people for the life he took. His people sacrifice themselves, but the evil man’s opponents still vow to kill the evil man and his remaining people. The evil man hears about this and gets angry; that’s why the battle starts.”

“Interesting.” ZeWu-Jun hummed. “The real question is if the battle never happens, what happens to those who would’ve survived and died, correct?”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “How does the person choose if he has the authority to decide what happens to those lives that came to after the battle? Marriages, births wouldn’t have happened. People would be different – would that be a good thing? Does a person have the authority to alter fate?”

ZeWu-Jun thought for a long time. When he looked up, he seemed more reassured.

“To me, it sounds like choosing the life of a few over lives of the lot. The lives of a few are those who would’ve lived after the battle. The lives of a lot are the ones who would’ve died

in the battle. It has been a difficult question to ask and to answer for hundreds of years.” He paused.

“Does... Does ZeWu-Jun know the answer?” Lan SiZhui asked shyly. Lan XiChen shook his head.

“I do not believe there is an answer. It is an impossible question. By the Lan teachings, I believe every single life is equally valuable. If I were put into that position...” He paused, then smiled faintly. “I’d like my answer to be to try saving both the few and the lot. In reality, I know in my heart I’d chose not to choose.”

“What do you mean?” Lan SiZhui asked quietly.

“If I would be that person who could go back in time and prevent the battle from happening, I wouldn’t. I’d not go back in time, or if it was out of my control, I’d remain a silent observer of history.”

“You wouldn’t do it? Even if you saw the injustice?” Lan SiZhui refused to think he was learning about ZeWu-Jun’s true feelings about the Bloodbath. The Lan Sect did not speak of the battle, nor the war. It was something like an unsaid taboo, so Lan SiZhui never knew what part his Sect took in the war or the battle against Wei WuXian.

“You’re testing my imagination, Lan SiZhui.” ZeWu-Jun smiled at him kindly. “I have never been at war, and I have never been put into a position where it was so difficult to decide what is right and what isn’t. The best answer I can give you is that I’d protect myself and mine, but I wouldn’t take sides.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui looked down, disappointed.

“It is an interesting moral dilemma you’ve decided to study. May I ask... Lan SiZhui, are you perhaps writing a book?” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as he looked into Lan XiChen’s teasing face. He swallowed, not wanting to lie but at the same time, it was a good excuse for his questions. “Ah, forgive me.” ZeWu-Jun shook his head. “I did not mean to pry into private matters. Although, you have to lend me a copy if you’re done.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui like this just became their shared secret and Lan SiZhui had to press his lips together to prevent a smile himself, because it was at ZeWu-Jun’s expense.

After a few moments, the smile faded from Lan XiChen’s face and he asked gently: “Does this relate to your argument? You still needn’t to tell me, but from the way you breached the topic told me your and Jin Ling’s argument was on a similar matter.”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” He nodded shyly.

“Did my consult help with that problem?” Lan SiZhui silently shook his head and ZeWu-Jun sighed sadly. When Lan SiZhui looked up to tell him it wasn’t like ZeWu-Jun needed to solve their argument, his adoptive uncle smiled at him. “Perhaps you could ask WangJi or the Grandmaster as well. They’ve always been more opiated than I.” He didn’t say it degrading in any way, nor towards his brother and uncle nor towards himself, so Lan SiZhui didn’t feel bad for nodding seriously.

“Can I... can I ask you one more thing, ZeWu-Jun?” He asked hesitantly and ZeWu-Jun nodded curiously. “Have you...” Lan SiZhui trailed off, unsure if he would get into trouble for knowing the name, but still wanting to ask. “Have you heard of a song called *Song of Winter* before?”

“It sounds familiar, but I can’t recall where from...” ZeWu-Jun hummed thoughtfully. He looked up before he could get lost in his thoughts too deep. “Why are you asking?”

“I... I’ve read it somewhere it was an earlier version of *Inquiry*.”

“Oh, yes, I remember now...” ZeWu-Jun trailed off, gaze turning searching as he watched Lan SiZhui. “Why did you mention it?” He asked slowly.

“I don’t know if ZeWu-Jun knows, but I’ve been practicing *Inquiry* for a while now. I have used it twice during my night-hunts so far.”

“That is very impressive.” ZeWu-Jun smiled. “Even WangJi needn’t to use it yet, although he had...” He trailed off with a melancholiac note, then shook his head, chasing the mood away. “Anyhow, that is well done.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Since *Inquiry* is one of my strongest cultivation, I have studied it deeply. I was just curious if ZeWu-Jun could tell me something.”

“I am not as talented with the guqin as my brother.” He mentioned. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Still, ZeWu-Jun is knowledgeable. Does ZeWu-Jun know if Qin language has any other uses other than talking to ghosts?”

“What do you mean?”

“When I read about *Song of Winter*, it described it as an inaccurate Qin language. However, in the book, it was implied that it can not only summon ghosts but also manipulate spiritual energy. If that is true, I wonder, could *Song of Winter* be used to control not only conversations but other things on a spiritual level?”

“Lan SiZhui, what you’re asking...” ZeWu-Jun’s eyebrows were drawn together in worry. “I don’t remember much about *Song of Winter*, but if you’re right, it is a dangerous song.”

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun misunderstands me. I do not wish to play *Song of Winter*. I couldn’t if I wanted to, since there are no sheets available to the public. No, that’s not... I was just wondering...” He trailed off. He couldn’t ask what he wanted without sounding like he was about to follow in the YiLing Patriarch’s footsteps, could he?

“Lan SiZhui?”

“ZeWu-Jun, please don’t think I am trying to think of wicked tricks. I... I just made a mistake and I’m trying to make it right. I was hoping there might be a way, but... ZeWu-Jun is right. I should consider other possibilities before even thinking about such things.”

“What kind of mistake have you made?” ZeWu-Jun asked quietly, worried.



"I... I just..." He just wanted to confess. Tell ZeWu-Jun everything, have him help figuring it out. Get them back to their own life, without seeing ghosts everywhere. Seeing ghosts everywhere... "I accidentally summoned some ghosts, and they won't go away." It was not a lie. Ghosts of the past were ghosts and Lan SiZhui summoned them. He bowed his head in shame. "I didn't mean to and Lan JingYi said it wasn't... But it's not Lan JingYi's fault!" He looked up with wide eyes, seeing ZeWu-Jun take a deep, relieved breath.

"Lan SiZhui." He said with a stiff smile. "Ghosts can be chased away. You needn't to think about such dark tricks. Haven't you been on numerous night-hunts before? Haven't you cleared towns from ghosts before?"

"Oh. I... I did. But usually it was enough to play *Cleansing*..." 'Cleansing! *Of course!*' If the altered version of 'Summoning' was what brought them here, then the opposite of 'Summoning' should be the one to get them back – either 'Clarity' or 'Purify' from *Cleansing*, or 'Release' from *Inquiry*. Since the *Collection of Time* seemed to contain *Inquiry* there was a higher chance it was 'Release' they needed to look for in the other songs. "Ah, ZeWu-Jun, thank you!" He looked up with a wide smile.

"For some reason, I have a feeling *Cleansing* wasn't the answer you've just found." ZeWu-Jun smiled knowingly.

"Ah, perhaps, but ZeWu-Jun helped me figure it out." Lan SiZhui beamed. "Thank you." He said more controlled than before. ZeWu-Jun smiled at him kindly.

"Alright, Lan SiZhui. It is well past curfew now." Lan SiZhui's eyes widened as he realized he must've spent around an hour conversing with ZeWu-Jun, since the tea was gone and what was left in the pot was not steaming anymore.

"I apologize for occupying your time so late!" Lan SiZhui jumped to his feet to bow.

"Let me accompany you back to your rooms so the night-guards don't stop you." ZeWu-Jun stood as well. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"ZeWu-Jun should not worry about a humble disciple like me. Please, don't let me keep your time even more."

"Lan SiZhui. You've got quite a lot of punishments as it is. I do not wish even more for you." He looked at the boy sadly.

"ZeWu-Jun is very thoughtful." Lan SiZhui bowed deeply.

## Responsibility I.

Lan SiZhui had rarely received physical punishment. He didn't break rules often either, and even when he did, mostly it happened in front of his family, who, while remaining just, never gave him as strict punishment.

Still, the Lan Sect's pupils' pain tolerance was high. The fifty strikes, although they would feel like five hundred, would be over quickly and they would feel only quite sore afterwards, not agony. Anyone watching Jin Ling now would be convinced otherwise, would be convinced they were about to be voluntarily sliced open with a thousand knives.

When they arrived, he easily knelt with Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi, listened to the Grandmaster, who listed their crimes, looking more and more worried, glancing behind his shoulder more and more often, at the brothers waiting with the boards.

"...and disrespecting your elders. You shall receive fifty strikes—"

"You won't actually hit us, will you?!" Jin Ling finally blurted, expression pale but angry as he couldn't decide if he should keep an eye on the threat at his back or glare at Grandmaster in front of them.

"Are you looking for more trouble, Jin Ling?!" Grandmaster fumed.

"I—You *can't* do that!" Jin Ling cried with so much conviction like it was true as the sky was blue. Grandmaster glared. "You *can't*! Do you know who *I am*?! I'm Sect—" He bit off the rest of the word, throwing an anxious look towards the two Lan disciples at his side. "I'm from the Jin Sect of Lanling and it is barbaric and an attack against—"

"It is your punishment ruled out by the Sect Leader of the Lan Sect of Gusu. The highest-ranking disciple of your Sect had been there when it was ruled out and he did not even make a peep on your behalf! You've come here as a guest disciple accepting that breaking the rules would bear consequences, so bear it with pride at least!"

"But you *can't* do this!" Jin Ling sounded genuinely terrified, unlike his usual protests.

"Enough!" Grandmaster bellowed. "Take your punishment, boy!"

"I won't!" Jun Ling tried to stand but he was pushed back on his knees by the disciple behind him. "Let me talk to Young Master Jin, if he learns you actually mean to do this, he can tell you: you *can't*!"

"Young Master Jin is aware you're being punished. Now sit down and accept it!"

"But this isn't punishment, it's... it's... It's just not! How can it be?! I'll copy the rules a thousand times more if needed!"

"You'll have to if you keep mouthing off! Now shut up and—"

“I’ll leave! I’ll leave the Cloud Recesses!”

“Enough! Your punishment is your punishment, if you’re so scared of it, it will have the effect it desires to have. Stop acting like you’ve never been hit for being naughty before and take it like the young man you already are, not like a child.” That made Lan SiZhui pause. Was it possible that despite so many threats, Jin Ling never had actually *received* physical punishment? Lan SiZhui looked over at the boy, now crying.

“Jin Ling.” He said quietly and the other turned to him with hopeful eyes. “It is alright. It won’t hurt that much and it will be over sooner than you think.” He said quietly, hopefully reassuring and kind. Jin Ling was trembling.

“But I’ve never...” He trailed off, pressing his lips together in embarrassment.

“I know.” Lan SiZhui smiled a sad smile. He wished he could reach over and squeeze the boy’s arm, but Grandmaster wouldn’t approve. “It’s alright. We’re here with you.”

“That’s right.” Lan JingYi said from next to Lan SiZhui. “Didn’t the Young Mistress say he wouldn’t spend his time crying when he could try his best instead?” For once, Lan SiZhui was thankful for Lan JingYi’s insensitive jabs, Jin Ling’s own words thrown back at him seemed to steel the Sect Leader.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling swallowed thickly but there was defiance in his voice as he turned straight ahead, hands clenching into fists at his sides. “I’ll take it.” Jin Ling was always stubborn and faced with a challenge, Lan SiZhui admired his bravery as well. It was clear he was still worried, but he’d made up his mind: he’d show Lan JingYi he could do it.

Reassured there won’t be any more protests and not willing to argue more, the Grandmaster signaled and the disciples at their backs, who sprang into action.

The fifty strikes were over quickly, quicker than Lan SiZhui thought they would be. He didn’t count them but he was sure they got all of them. Still, it felt less somehow. Perhaps it was because Jin Ling tried his hardest not to cry out and take them with a straight spine, and so Lan SiZhui kept his brave face as well. He didn’t even realize the Grandmaster kept quizzing him and Lan JingYi throughout it, asking them to recite the rules of the Lan Sect.

For a long moment after they’ve been dismissed, Jin Ling just knelt there, his breaths deep and desperate. After a pause, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi stood on each of his sides and helped him to his feet, bowing to Grandmaster, making Jin Ling with their movements as well.

Walking away, Jin Ling was hissing and grunting in pain, but they couldn’t do much about it. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi both had high pain tolerance and they weren’t as hurt, being used to physical punishment.

“Is it...” Jin Ling hissed on an inhale. “Is it always this bad?”

“You get used to it.” Lan JingYi shrugged. “It’s not like you haven’t been beaten for misbehaving before. Sure, it’s a bit more than what you’d get as a child or even a junior...”

He trailed off at Lan SiZhui's look and subtle headshake. "What? Don't tell me you've never been hit before."

"Sure." Jin Ling grunted as they were going up some steps. "Slapped on the hand or on the rear, kicked and punched." He took a lengthy pause. "But never with a *board*."

"What?" Lan JingYi laughed confused. "Of course, you were. I know for a fact every Sect and Clan uses the board."

"They do." Jin Ling growled lowly. "Just not on *me*."

"I—" Lan JingYi trailed off, another chuckle bubbling up. "You're joking, right?"

"Jin GuangYao didn't believe in physical punishment, so my teachers at Koi Tower were the only ones who hit me and it was either with their hands or their canes. Since Uncle is maternal, he didn't have the right to sentence such severe punishment, so I was always just caned at Lotus Pier."

"You've never been stuck with a board before?!" Lan JingYi asked incredulous. "That's impossible! Even Lan SiZhui had been."

"Lying is... ow. Lying is prohibited in the Cloud Recesses."

"It's true!" Lan JingYi exclaimed. "I'm pretty sure before too, but when we were ten, we snuck into a class and practiced in a practice exorcism. By the time the teacher noticed it had already been done, so Grandmaster was furious with us. That was the first time I got fifty."

"Me too. Before it had only been twenty at most." Lan SiZhui nodded.

"Twenty—what have the model Lan SiZhui done to earn twenty?!" Jin Ling glared as they stopped in front of the Jin Sect guest quarters.

"I followed Hanguang-Jun into Moling when he departed on a night-hunt." He said sheepishly. "He had to take me back himself. I was seven."

"Really?!" Lan JingYi exclaimed excited and shocked.

"You..." Jin Ling trailed off. A group of disciples departed from the houses, heading to their first classes. "How did he not notice?"

"I kept my distance. He didn't travel by sword. When we got to Moling I was distracted by something and by the time I was ready to follow I've lost him. I sat in the middle of the street and cried because I thought I'd have to live on the streets. Hanguang-Jun was alerted by the commotion I've caused and came back. He took me to an inn for the night and didn't say anything other than eat and sleep, no matter how much I asked if he was mad at me. The next day he took me back to the Cloud Recesses on his sword. He left me with ZeWu-Jun, then left. The next morning, I was punished for it."

"How come you've never told me?!" Lan JingYi glared at him and Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes.

“It was the most severe punishment a seven-year-old could get. I daren’t to say a word about it to anyone. I had been punished and forgiven. By the time Hanguang-Jun returned, it was as if it never happened, so I acted like it as well.”

“You’re worse than Lan JingYi!” Jin Ling glared at him. “I don’t know how I ever thought you were so impeccable.” Lan SiZhui felt his face heat up.

“Jin Ling.” The silky and even voice came from the path that led to the main buildings, and the three boys looked over, only to discover Young Master Jin with his group of disciples standing a polite distance away. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi quickly pushed themselves away from the gate where they’d propped Jin Ling up to and bowed.

“Young Master Jin.” They said in unison. Jin ZiXuan didn’t acknowledge them.

“Go and resume your punishment.” He said with an impassive face. Jin Ling’s eyes widened.

“But I just got beaten, my punishment can—”

“It was Grandmaster Lan’s orders that you don’t slack on your punishment.” Jin ZiXuan said. “We’ve already been humiliated by your actions in the Cloud Recesses.”

“And?!” Jin Ling glared, forgetting who he was talking to. “Saving face is more important to you than the pain I’m in?!” He huffed. His answer was telling silence. “You—!”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Came another voice from further down the path. Looking over, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui bowed to the Yunmeng disciples. “Image, after all, is very important to the Jin Sect of Lanling.” Wei WuXian said in a teasing tone, while Jiang WanYin at his side glared at him.

“What would you know about it?” A Jin Sect disciple scoffed at him, stepping forward. “You got into just as much trouble. Isn’t the Jiang Sect of Yunmeng embarrassed by you?”

“I’m sorry, who are you?” The question sounded more like a jab than actual curiosity – like Wei WuXian knew who he was, but wanted to humiliate the man by pretending not to.

“How dare you--!” The disciple went red in the face, but then a Lady from Jiang WanYin’s side stepped forward, touching Wei WuXian on the arm gently.

“A-Xian.” She did not look up from the ground. “Let’s go.” She said quietly. Wei WuXian looked as if he was ready to obey, which was strange, but before they could move, the Jin disciple spoke again.

“Standing behind Lady Jiang’s robes again?” The lady lowered her eyes even more and Wei WuXian’s grip on Suibian tightened.

“I thought we’ve talked about this the other night.” Wei WuXian said coldly.

“Oh, so you *do* remember me!” The disciple said triumphantly. Next to Wei WuXian, Jiang WanYin shook his head, looking down and sighing, a gesture that was unfamiliar to the three boys from the future.

“Junior Young Master Jin, excuse us for the disturbance. We’ll be going now.” He took hold of Wei WuXian’s arm and tugged. “Let’s go.”

“Didn’t I tell you already?” The disciple stood in Jiang WanYin’s way. “It is *Young Master Jin!*” His grip on his sword spoke of intention.

“Why?” Wei WuXian raised arrogant eyebrows. “He’s not yet sixteen. He shouldn’t be addressed other than his rank.” He glared at the man pointedly, like he was having another argument instead the one they heard. The disciple’s eyes widened and he unsheathed his sword. At that, even Jin ZiXuan looked up and the Yunmeng disciples shared a startled look.

“Young Masters, please don’t argue.” Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and stepped between them, bowing to the Jin Sect. “Sir, fighting without permission is prohibited in the Cloud Recesses.”

“Give me permission then, let me cut his tongue out!” The disciple sneered.

“Sir, please calm down. No need to lose your temper. Young Master Wei is correct. If Young Master Jin is not yet sixteen, he should be addressed properly. However, Young Master Jin is the highest-ranking disciple of the Jin Sect in Cloud Recesses at the moment, and he will soon turn sixteen. Because of that, Young Master Jin cannot be addressed as Junior Young Master Jin, because he actually outranks the juniors and seniors present.”

“Seems like our rule-obeying Lan SiZhui is back.” He heard Jin Ling whisper to Lan JingYi, who snorted softly at that. He didn’t pay them any attention as he was still bowing to the two Sects. After a long pause, where the disciple was glaring at Wei WuXian, who watched Lan SiZhui with delight, Young Master Jin nodded to Jiang WanYin, then with a flick of his sleeve he turned. Before he departed, he called over to Jin Ling:

“Continue your punishment as ordered.” And with his disciples in row, he left. Wei WuXian huffed out a breath, crossing his arms across his chest.

“This Jin Sect of Lanling really is arrogant.” He grumbled.

“Are you insane?!” Jiang WanYin suddenly blurted. “Stop picking fights all the time! We’re not home! Act properly!”

“Hey! I was!” Wei WuXian turned to him, pouting.

“You’re never!”

“Well, what about you?! You needn’t to call him *Junior Young Master.*”

“I forgot, okay?”

“You forgot?!” Wei WuXian grinned at Jiang WanYin’s... embarrassed?! expression.

“I can forget things!” The weak argument from the Sect Leader—no, *Young Master Jiang* almost made a laugh bubble out of Lan SiZhui’s mouth. Lan JingYi had less control over his snickers, but thankfully, they went unnoticed.

“Alright, you two.” Lady Jiang stepped forward, looking up for the first time with a gentle smile as she took hold of Jiang WanYin’s arm. “The day had just started and you’re already being rowdy.”

“It’s not my fault!” Young Master Jiang grumbled, looking away. Lan SiZhui could hardly believe his eyes. Was Young Master Jiang pouting?! “It’s his, like always.” He nodded towards Wei WuXian with his chin.

“Why is it always my fault?!” Wei WuXian protested.

“You were the one who had to get involved!” Jiang WanYin’s voice, despite the scolding words, was light and open with affection. Lan SiZhui had never heard him talk to anyone like that.

“A-Xian was very valiant for wanting to help brother Jin.” Lady Jiang said with a nod and a smile towards Jin Ling, who went red in the face at the kind words and looked down.

“Wei WuXian was looking for a fight as always. There was nothing valiant about it.” Jiang WanYin said calmer this time. “Why are you praising him?”

“Perhaps you’re just jealous that I dared to call *Junior* Young Master Jin out!” Wei WuXian teased arrogantly.

“You—!” Now that tone, face and temper was more familiar, but that was about it, because the next moment Lady Jiang put her hand on Jiang WanYin’s and Wei WuXian’s arms.

“Enough.” She said so gently, Lan SiZhui was surprised the two rowdy boys immediately stepped back and looked away from each other, willingly calming down. He wondered who this lady was to be able to play the brothers so easily. If only she was present in the future, perhaps Jiang WanYin and Wei WuXian would’ve made up a long time ago. Maybe if she was present at the Bloodbath, Wei WuXian would’ve never died by Jiang WanYin’s sword.

“We’re late from our classes, and A-Xian has punishment.” She teased with a smile and Wei WuXian made a long-suffering face. “Let us go and begin the day properly.”

“He’s the one who gets into trouble all the time, no need to tell me!” Young Master Jiang nodded towards Wei WuXian with his chin, who made a face at him. Jiang WanYin glared back, the boys arguing with their faces. Lan SiZhui wasn’t able to repress his smile this time. The lady Jiang looked between the brothers and with a fond smile, shook her head at them, taking hold of their arms properly and turning them forward, towards where Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui stood. With the Lady’s lead, the Yunmeng disciples bowed respectfully.

“Brother Lan, thank you for keeping the peace between A-Xian and the Jin Sect.” She lowered her eyes. “We’re indebted to you.” Jiang WanYin and Wei WuXian looked at her, but other than acceptance, there was no hard feelings reflecting on their faces.

“As a Lan Sect disciple, it is my place to make sure everyone, including myself keeps themselves to the rules.” Lan SiZhui said with a bow. “It is actually no trouble at all. Please, don’t feel indebted.”

“Lan SiZhui, why are you acting all proper now?” Wei WuXian pouted. “We’re in punishment together, remember? You do not need to be so proper.”

“Like you know what proper is.” Lan JingYi grinned with a teasing tone. Wei WuXian frowned at him playfully.

“And who are you again?” He asked with an air of arrogance, but unlike earlier, he seemed to be genuinely lost about Lan JingYi’s identity.

“Why would I tell you?” Lan JingYi looked Wei WuXian up and down. “Shouldn’t you introduce yourself first?”

“Ah, but brother Lan, you seem to be already familiar with me while I don’t remember you.” He said, rubbing his chin in thought, the gesture familiar. “Perhaps we met before?”

“Of course, you did, you were—” Jin Ling started, then trailed off, remembering they weren’t in their time anymore. “I mean, surely you’ve met, since Lan JingYi is so familiar with your antics.” He tried to save face, looking away.

“That’s right.” Wei WuXian seemed to start to think about that, which was dangerous. Lan SiZhui knew just how sharp his mind was. If anyone would figure them out, it would be Wei WuXian – who would also be the worst person to find out they were from the future. “And you seem to be familiar with me as well, brother Jin, and you, other brother Lan.” He narrowed his eyes at them and was quiet for a long moment, when Lan SiZhui couldn’t meet his eyes. “Perhaps you are...” *‘From the future, yes.’* “Brothers I’ve drank with in Yunmeng but was too drunk to remember!” He said with a wide grin. Jin Ling glared at him.

“Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi don’t drink, you lunatic!” He scoffed. “You don’t even know that?!”

“What about you, brother Jin?” Wei WuXian tilted his head to the side. Jin Ling looked down and murmured something under his breath. “What was that?”

“My Uncle forbids drinking!” He snapped, looking up. “And it’s all yo—” He cut himself off abruptly. “It’s all the fault of an uncle who was drinking heavily when he was alive. Are you going to be like that, too?”

“Why are you blaming me for the actions of your late uncle?” Wei WuXian frowned. “How is it my fault?”

“I told you already, Wei WuXian. You drink too much.” Jiang WanYin said from behind them. “Think about your future nephews. What if they end up disgusted by alcohol because they see how you behave?” The breath hitched in Lan SiZhui’s chest. So, Jiang WanYin really banned Jin Ling from drinking because it reminded him of Wei WuXian? How peculiar!

“Boys.” The lady stepped forward. “We’re late. We should get going.” She said it kindly, but scolding. Wei WuXian and Jiang WanYin glanced at her, then at each other.



“Go, I have punishment with these brothers anyways.” Wei WuXian said with a wave of his sword.

“Don’t cause more trouble. And come to the afternoon classes.” Lan SiZhui was surprised by how casual the conversation was. There was no hint of annoyance or animosity in Jiang WanYin’s voice. He’d never heard the other man not angry before. Wei WuXian also answered uncharacteristically calm and collected.

“Yes.” He nodded, then turned fully towards the Yunmeng disciples as if something just occurred to him. He grinned at the lady Jiang. “Sister, I’ll see you in the afternoon.” The air stilled around Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui.

*‘Jiang YanLi... Jin Ling’s mother?!’*

“I’ll be waiting for A-Xian.” The lady smiled soft and kind. Jiang WanYin also looked soft and fond at his two siblings. It was... bizarre.

Jiang WanYin didn’t bow to them, only glanced from the corner of his eyes, then the Yunmeng disciples left. First was Young Master Jiang, who gripped Wei WuXian’s shoulder as he passed, then Lady Jiang, who caressed his arm the same way in passing. The other disciples all smiled and nodded to Wei WuXian as they went. Then the four of them were left alone.

“Mother...” Jin Ling whispered, looking after the disciples.

“Jin Ling, how are you feeling?” Lan SiZhui asked to draw his attention away from her. Jin Ling looked back at him startled, then at Wei WuXian, down the arm his mother had touched so casually.

“I’m fine.” He said quietly, the quietest Lan SiZhui heard him.

“Are you well enough to continue your punishment in the library?”

“Yes.” He looked down, and for the first time ever, there was no anger, annoyance, sorrow or any other negative emotions on his face. He looked blank, but also almost... hopeful?

“Then let us go. Second Young Master Lan does not like tardiness.” Lan SiZhui nodded to him while Lan JingYi squeezed his shoulder. Seemingly the touch brought the Sect Leader out of whatever trace he was in, he blinked and a more familiar scowl marred his face again.

“Does he like anything?” He scoffed as he pushed himself away from the gate and headed towards the library. The other three followed.

“Of course, he does, he likes—” Lan JingYi trailed off and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw him glance at Wei WuXian before snapping his gaze back forward.

“What?” Wei WuXian’s eyes widened as he skipped between the two Lan disciples. “What does Lan Zhan like? Tell me! Is it embarrassing?” He grinned mischievously.

“Quite.” Jin Ling grumbled under his breath so only Lan SiZhui heard.

“I can’t say!” Lan JingYi protested. “It’s none of your business!”

“How are you even a Lan, being so harsh to others?” Wei WuXian pouted. “I’ll just ask Lan SiZhui then. Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui, what does Lan Zhan like?”

“He likes proper discipline and order.” Lan SiZhui answered truthfully.

“Oh, come on, you grew up with him, have you not? You surely know his likes and dislikes. Girls, food anything. What did he do as a child, did he get into trouble?” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as he looked over at Wei WuXian. How did that even occur to him to ask, Hanguang-Jun was his father, and... and they were in the past! When Hanguang-Jun was the same age as Lan SiZhui!

“Heavens.” He grunted out like he’d been punched. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling immediately turned to him in alarm. He shook his head quickly to signal he was fine. “I just realized something. It’s nothing. Let us go.” They side-eyed him for the remainder of the way, then they arrived to the Library Pavilion. Lan SiZhui knocked and at Hanguang-Jun’s voice, he opened the door.

As they entered, he couldn’t take his eyes off his adoptive father. They were about the same age now. Hanguang-Jun was seventeen already when Wei WuXian came to the lectures. He looked almost identical to how Lan SiZhui remembered him, save a few scars and wrinkles on his face. He got a cut across the eyebrow when Lan SiZhui was twelve, he remembered, because it took weeks to heal. It left a scar and a little imperfection in his elegant eyebrows. The scar was not present now.

His forehead ribbon was also different, the lightest blue that could easily be mistaken for white but wasn’t. The Hanguang-Jun Lan SiZhui knew never wore blue headband, only white. He also wore his hair differently. He usually preferred his high ornament Lan SiZhui gifted to him when he went on his first practice hunt as an official cultivator disciple. Now it was in a low style, with a long ornament instead that Lan SiZhui also recognized – it was one Lan XiChen gifted him along with his sword at thirteen.

Of course, it shouldn’t surprise him his adoptive father barely aged all this time. Him, and he imagined all the seniors they knew in the future had high cultivation, which meant they were able to slow their bodies’ natural aging, keeping them young and healthy. There were a few things different, but overall, their powers kept them young. And Lan SiZhui assumed, since he knew their faces so well, he hardly noticed these changes when they first arrived to the past, way too acclimated with their features to note the difference. Back then, he didn’t even think to look for these signs! It was easier to be ignorant when one was oblivious.

“You’re late.” Hanguang-Jun said from his perch at his table, looking up at them, his brush set aside neatly, book open in front of him with blank pages to copy. It shook Lan SiZhui out of his staring and he immediately turned away, embarrassed to be ogling Hanguang-Jun so openly.

“Sorry, Lan Zhan.” Wei WuXian grinned easily. “I don’t rise with the sun.”

“Han—Second Young Master Lan, we apologize for the tardiness.” Lan SiZhui was quick to correct himself, since at this time Lan WangJi had yet to earn his title. “We did not realize Jin Ling needed to continue his punishment today so we escorted him back to the Jin guest rooms. Young Master Jin alerted us that his presence is needed.”

“Your back.” Hanguang-Jun addressed Jin Ling in a rare moment of concern towards anyone who wasn’t Wei WuXian. Jin Ling also looked surprised at that.

“I’m fine.” He scoffed snappily, then stomped over to his table and sat heavily. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed to Hanguang-Jun, then headed to the back of the Pavilion to the punishment room.

“Ah I forgot you’re ahead of me.” Lan JingYi pouted once they were out of sight. “You’ll leave a day before me.”

“You’ve done plenty of copies without me before.” Lan SiZhui said kindly.

“But I got used to your company. Without your guidance what will remind me to tap my brush? I’ll drip ink all over the floor.”

“Lan JingYi, this floor has seen more of your ink than anyone else’s.” Lan SiZhui smiled.

“Ah, that’s right.” Lan JingYi frowned like he tasted something foul. “That one time I spilled the whole pot. I thought I sent Grandmaster into qi deviation.”

“He was madder when you brought a bunny to class because you thought it was dying.”

“She was barely moving! How would I have known she was pregnant and about to give birth?!” Lan JingYi pouted as they finished setting up their stations. From the other room, they suddenly heard laughter and quieted. Then Hanguang-Jun said:

“Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui. Concentrate on your tasks.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan!” They were quick to bow, then got into position. After they’ve oriented themselves, which took a minute, they heard Wei WuXian from the other room:

“Lan JingYi, did the bunny really give birth during class with Grandmaster Lan?” They could hear him barely contain his laughter.

“Had to dismiss the whole class everyone was laughing so hard.” Lan JingYi grunted out. Wei WuXian’s delighted laugh sounded from the other room.

“I do not remember an occasion like that.” Lan WangJi said once Wei WuXian had calmed down.

“You do, you gave...” He started, then halted. Hanguang-Jun was the one who gave Lan JingYi five handstand copies and three days straight kneeling as punishment. But that hadn’t happened yet. “Right. You were... travelling.” Lan JingYi grunted.

“I bet if he was there, Lan Zhan would’ve given Lan JingYi the most severe punishment.” Wei WuXian was audibly grinning.

“Go back to your works.” Hanguang-Jun said in the end, and both rooms fell into quiet, tapping of inkpots and turning of pages taking over instead of laughter and conversation.

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“WangJi.” They heard Lan XiChen’s voice just after morning classes should’ve ended. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi just got back into position after taking a break. After their sharing of the bunny story, no one spoke in the library, everyone occupied with their works. Even Wei WuXian and Jin Ling remained quiet, not complaining about their tasks for once.

“Brother.” The only reason Lan SiZhui heard the surprise in his voice was because he grew up with Hanguang-Jun. “You are here.”

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to check. How are these disciples behaving?” He asked, sounding amused.

“Quiet at once.”

“Good.” Lan XiChen said shortly. “Keep working.” He said, then his footsteps led him to... the Room of Forbidden Books! Lan SiZhui almost fell over, he looked over at Lan JingYi in alarm so suddenly. He saw the other boy startled as well. There was a sound of a sword being drawn, then a heavy object moved as the door opened.

“Hey, where does that lead?!” Wei WuXian asked.

“Why is that any of your business?!” Jin Ling snapped.

“You know?” Wei WuXian addressed him and Jin Ling quieted.

“Go back to your work.” Hanguang-Jun said sharply.

“Lan Zhan, will you not tell us?” Wei WuXian asked as the door closed behind ZeWu-Jun.

“No.”

“Why not? Do you keep exciting books there?” He sounded like he was grinning.

“More like gruesome. Don’t be so curious.” Jin Ling grumbled.

“But what does brother Jin know about the Lan library I do not?” Wei WuXian pouted.

“Lan SiZhui is my cousin by association. As a Sect—As a good friend I should learn as much as I can about his Sect. Don’t be so obnoxious. It is GusuLan business.”

“Lan SiZhui is your cousin?!”

“By association!” Jin Ling protested. “My uncle is the brother of his adoptive father. One of them, anyways. It’s not a big deal.” He sounded annoyed and embarrassed.

“One of them?! Lan SiZhui’s adoptive parents are—”

“Gossip is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses. Concentrate on your works.” Hanguang-Jun cut him off.

“How do you know...” Lan JingYi started, “that We—The Yi—You-know-who was his adoptive... father anyways?”

“Well, after the rumors Lan SiZhui started with Wen Ning began, it wasn’t long after people in YiLing started talking anyways!” Jin Ling called back a bit louder than necessary. Lan SiZhui flinched.

“Please stop talking.” Lan SiZhui grunted. “It is private and... secret, remember?” There was a pause, then Wei WuXian asked, surprised.

“Wen Ning? What does he have to do with Lan SiZhui? Are you friends with him, too? Just how strange your little group of friends is? And, when were they in YiLing? Surely, I’d have heard of something like this. And what rumors do you mean?” Lan SiZhui closed his eyes and tried to take deep breaths.

“Go back to your works.” Hanguang-Jun said strictly.

“But Lan Zhan, aren’t you curious—Mm. Mm!”

“Serves you right, being so nosy!” Jin Ling sneered, then quiet settled on the rooms for a while. After a few minutes, they heard a melody. It came from underneath the floor. Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as he recognized *Song of Winter*.

“No.” Lan JingYi breathed.

“It’s alright!” Lan SiZhui whispered. “I asked him about it last night... but didn’t reveal anything! He must’ve gotten... curious.”

“Are you sure?!” Lan JingYi hissed back, alarmed.

“Yes.”

“Quiet.” Lan WangJi told them, so they closed their mouths. The notes faded and there was no sound for a long time after that.

“Second Young Master Lan, can I have a break?” Jin Ling asked after a few more minutes. He was probably waiting until Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi got a break as well, because he appeared in the room just as they came out of position. He looked around, coming uncomfortably close to the two of them. “Can you put on silencing charms here?” He asked in a whisper.

Lan SiZhui shook his head, then something occurred to him. He held up a hand, then jumped on shaky feet and picked up a talisman paper from a nearby shelf with a collection of talismans from another. He flipped through the book and finding what he was looking for managed to draw three charms. He then passed them over, one each of his friends. He activated his, and the others followed his example.

*Talking without Words* was a difficult charm. Lan SiZhui wasn't sure how long theirs would last. The better one was with talismans the longer they held, and Lan SiZhui, while more practiced than his peers, was not an expert at all.

'*Can you hear me?*' He asked, looking at the two others.

"Yes." Jin Ling furrowed his brows. Lan SiZhui shook his head and pointed at his mouth.

*'It is Talking without Words. A charm used by spies some odd time ago. You needn't to speak out loud. We must be quick; my talismans aren't the best. I've visited ZeWu-Jun for consult last night. I've asked him about the Song of Winter. He must've gotten curious about it, it is why he is here now.'*

'*How do we know he won't figure us out upon looking into Collection of Time?*' Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling nodded in agreement to the question.

*'ZeWu-Jun is smart, but even he can't suspect we've time traveled just because he doesn't recall seeing us around the Cloud Recesses.'* Except if Lan SiZhui gave him too many clues last night, but he was reassured ZeWu-Jun thought he was writing a book.

'*So, what do we do now?*' Jin Ling asked, and his eyes widened as he tapped his lips that were closed. *'Wait, you can't hear all my thoughts, can you?'*

'*What thoughts?*' Lan JingYi rolled his eyes and Jin Ling glared at him angrily.

*'We do nothing. He won't figure us out unless we act suspicious.'* Lan SiZhui felt the charm weakening. *'Act normal. Ah, and Sect Leader Jin, please refrain from spilling more suspicious details. You too, Lan JingYi. We must act as if we are the most common amongst the disciples. No more weird family history or mischief no one remembers.'* He looked at them both seriously. Before they could answer, the charm ran out.

"You're just like your adoptive fathers." Jin Ling rolled his eyes, discarding the talisman. "Don't do this, don't do that. Do this, do that. So bossy!"

"It is important that you listen to me, Se—Young Master Jin. Please." Lan SiZhui pleaded. "We're in a complicated situation as it is."

"You know how hard it is for him to not make comments all the time." Lan JingYi noted. "Maybe we should put silencing spell on him for as long as we're here."

"I'll put a spell on you!" Jin Ling glared at Lan JingYi angrily.

"Continue your punishments." Hanguang-Jun said from the other side of the wall.

“Anyways, I can keep my mouth shut.” Jin Ling challenged as he stood. “Can you?” He glared at Lan JingYi, who raised arrogant eyebrows.

“Of course, I can. I’m a Lan Sect disciple.” He scoffed, then pointedly turned away from Jin Ling, who made a face at his back before storming to the other room. Just as he left the punishment room, the door to the Forbidden Room opened and he halted. ZeWu-Jun closed the door.

“Jin Ling. I hope your back doesn’t cause you too much trouble.” ZeWu-Jun said after an awkward silence.

“I’m fine.” Jin Ling huffed defiantly.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.”

“Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi are familiar with you, so they call you by your birth name instead of your courtesy name. Is that your preference?”

“What do you mean?” Jin Ling sounded like he was frowning.

“Ah, just curious about your courtesy name, brother Jin.”

“It’s none—“ Jin Ling started, then must’ve realized who he was talking to. “It’s my preference to be addressed by my birthname, yes.” He said after a pause.

“I see. Excuse my prying.” ZeWu-Jun said kindly.

“Don’t apologize.” Jin Ling grumbled uncomfortably.

“Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi, return to your punishments.” Hanguang-Jun said softly. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed to the wall.

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” And returned to position. They heard Jin Ling go as well, but ZeWu-Jun hadn’t left yet. He went to another side of the library, further from the five of them so he wouldn’t hear much of their talk, probably.

“Brother Jin, what is your courtesy name?” Wei WuXian asked with a pout.

“It’s none of your business.”

“Is it something embarrassing?” He grinned this time, it was audible from the delight in his voice.

“Yes.” Strangely, Jin Ling admitted.

“Really? That bad?” Wei WuXian sounded taken aback. Jin Ling let out a noisy sigh.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t ask you about your—about your past either, don’t ask me about mine.”

“If you tell me your courtesy name, I won’t ask anything else. Deal?”

“When did the Silence Spell lift from you anyways?” Jin Ling grumbled, then fell quiet. Wei WuXian didn’t ask again.

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ZeWu-Jun left before Wei WuXian and Jin Ling left for lunch, and then the library pavilion fell into silence. Only Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui worked there, upside down. They made a good team. While Lan SiZhui’s taps reminded Lan JingYi to tap his own brush, Lan JingYi’s almost scarily accurate hourly breaks reminded Lan SiZhui to take them himself.

“Two more days of this and I’m going to sleep for a week.” Lan JingYi scoffed as he massaged his arms as they were reminded by a brother they were done for the day. They stayed in the library for a short while after to regroup.

“Lan JingYi, should we come back tonight and work on our problem?” Lan SiZhui asked after a pause. Lan JingYi hummed.

“I don’t think we’ll have the energy. Besides, ZeWu-Jun took books from the Forbidden Room, who knows if *Collection of Time* was amongst them.”

“What? How could you tell?” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Why else would he sit after departing from the room?” Lan JingYi looked at him with wide eyes. “And he didn’t return them. I have a suspicion he took them to the Mingshi like you wanted to, to study them.”

“But if we don’t have the book, how will we reverse the spell?!” Lan SiZhui asked alarmed. Lan JingYi shrugged. “Are you not worried?” Lan SiZhui asked, surprised at the nonchalance.

“Lan SiZhui, did you know before my parents left for the night-hunt, I begged them not to leave? They left me with some elders in Moling and I hated it every time. I begged them to stay like always, and just like always, they promised it will be alright. They always thought I didn’t want to see them go, but in reality, I just hated the elders they left me with. They were smelly and loud and always made me sweep the floors to their shop.

“Anyways, I asked them, like always: ‘You will come back soon, right?’ And their answer was, like always: ‘As soon as we can.’ Then that day my father added: ‘A-Cheng, you know why we need to leave, right? We can’t let people suffer just because we want to be with our loved ones. What about their loved ones?’ And I said...” He paused, biting his lips, looking down. “I said: ‘Why do you care about some random people? I’m your child, shouldn’t I be more important to you than them?’



“I could see he was disappointed, but he just smiled at me sadly and said: ‘Perhaps you don’t understand yet. But one day you will.’” He paused again, rubbing at his nose. “After news got back that they’ve died, and after the funeral, I promised at the ancestors’ hall I’ll make sure nobody will ever need to suffer like I did then, just because I was so selfish.”

“Lan JingYi...”

“Lan SiZhui, I love you like you’re my brother, but ever since my parents died I’ve lived my life to help anyone I can if they needed it and I was able to. I’m able to help those who will die in this war. They need it. I cannot let them suffer, just because I had a good life back home. Maybe we’ll never meet, maybe you’ll grow up with the Wen survivors. I do not know what the future holds for us, but I know that not acting just because we’re selfish and scared is not the way my father wanted me to be.”

“Lan JingYi, these people have died long ago. You said it yourself. We’re walking amongst ghosts of the past.”

“But we’re here. It is reality, not a ghost!” Lan JingYi exclaimed, picking up his brush. “This is solid.” He took Lan SiZhui’s hand and put the brush into it, closing his hand around it and squeezing. “This is real. Wei WuXian is. Lan WangJi is. ZeWu-Jun, Jin ZiXuan, Jiang YanLi. They’re real, Lan SiZhui. Not ghosts.”

“It is history we’re reliving.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, Lan JingYi still holding his hand. He put his own on top and squeezed. “It might be real but it is not different than how things happened.”

“We weren’t here last time!”

“And we shouldn’t be now either!”

“Maybe not, but we *are*. So, if we’re here, if we’re able to, and we’re needed, why shouldn’t we help?”

“It is not right to meddle with fate.”

“It is not right to let people die.”

“JingYi...”

“If... If you’re so sure we’re not meant to be here and that fate is a decided thing, couldn’t we just try? Maybe all our efforts will be in vain, maybe all these people die anyways, but at least we can say we tried. Isn’t that better than sit around and watch?”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, looking down at their clasped hands, brows furrowed. He did not know the right answer. What he believed they should do went against what he believed was right, but none of those sides were winning.

He knew why Lan JingYi told him. When his parents died, Lan JingYi learned a lesson and he did not want to forget it. And Lan SiZhui agreed. Of course, he did. He admired his friend for having such a solid opinion, but he didn’t. He wasn’t sure it was good to alter the past. It

was, after all, the past. It was how things were supposed to go. It was how they went. Were they Gods, to question that?

“Jin Ling could save his parents, SiZhui.” Lan JingYi said quietly after a long pause. “Give him a chance.”

“Let’s go.” Lan SiZhui said after another pause and stood. Lan JingYi followed him quietly.

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How strange Lan SiZhui’s life had become that when the night and next morning was spent almost as if they were back home was suspiciously strange. None of them got additional punishment, no one snuck out at night. Other than Jin Ling’s absence during dinner, which he probably spent with *his father*, everything was as it should’ve been. They all showed up for punishment. Of course, rising early, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi started their punishment sooner than Wei WuXian and Jin Ling.

Hanguang-Jun arrived earlier. They heard him go around the library, choosing books and taking them to his table, arranging Wei WuXian and Jin Ling’s stations. They took their first break when the two still haven’t arrived. Lan JingYi was studying his own text with furrowed brows, and Lan SiZhui left him to it, meditating.

“Lan SiZhui, I realized something strange.”

“What is it?”

“There are... less rules.”

“What?” He frowned, opening his eyes and looked over.

“Yes, I was feeling like something’s been missing from day one, but now I realize!” He exclaimed excitedly, passing his text over to Lan SiZhui. “Four sections are missing.”

“That can’t be right.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. There was no way he didn’t notice four entire sessions missing! “Morality isn’t here. Nor is Peace, Pride and Responsibility.” How did he miss it? True, copying rules was a repetitive task and Lan SiZhui wasn’t above admitting most of the time he didn’t pay attention to the words he was writing concentrating on doing every brushstroke right. Still, he must’ve been truly distracted not to notice something so significant!

They looked at each other, then Lan SiZhui stood. “Let’s ask Hanguang-Jun.” Lan JingYi nodded and together, they went out to Hanguang-Jun, who was just settling behind his table. They waited until he placed Bichen on the table, then he looked up curiously.

“Second Young Master Lan, we have a question about the rules.” At Lan JingYi’s bow, Hanguang-Jun looked surprised.

“Yes.”

“How many rules are on the Wall of Disciple?”

“Three thousand, one hundred and sixty-one.” They paused, looked at each other, then with renewed passion, Lan JingYi started asking questions rapidly.

“How many sections are in Righteousness?”

“Twelve.”

“Is there a rule such as: ‘*Do not pass responsibility on others*’?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a surprised look.

“Is there one saying: ‘*Do not question right or wrong*’?” Negative answer. “Such as: ‘*Do not let love defy you*’?” Negative. “One saying: ‘*Damage caused under duress is still damage*’?”

“No.” Hanguang-Jun looked at them strangely, but it was strange for them. They heard rules had been added after the war, but they didn’t think they were so many! “You should know the rules by heart.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” They bowed.

“If that is all, return to your punishments.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” They went back to the punishment room and got into position. Lan JingYi was grinning widely. Lan SiZhui shook his head affectionately.

They’ve just started when Wei WuXian and Jin Ling arrived. They were a few minutes late, but they weren’t called out on it, and they started copying without a complaint. The morning went by quietly. Jin Ling didn’t visit them during his breaks, nor did Wei WuXian. Then after lunch, the three of them left and Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were left alone once again. As soon as they were done, they headed for dinner, barely able to hold their swords with numb arms.

In the dining hall, however, Jin Ling was waiting for them, not sitting, but waiting in the door, frowning at every disciple who passed him. When he saw Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui, his face brightened.

“Finally! It took you two forever to arrive. Come on, let’s go to Lan SiZhui’s room to dine.” He turned and grabbed a tray, like he was at home, piling food onto it. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look but followed his example. Lan SiZhui also added some tea to his. In Lan SiZhui’s rooms, they ate first, but Jin Ling was restless during the meal, stuffing bread into his mouth and drinking soup straight from his bowl. Once they were done and Lan SiZhui served tea, he finally broke.

“The strangest thing happened today during lectures!” He said excitedly. Lan JingYi raised skeptical eyebrows as he pulled the bowl containing almonds Lan SiZhui kept there to accompany tea in front of him. He popped one in his mouth as he asked:

“What?”

“Grandmaster Lan was holding the lecture. Half the room was asleep, the other half Lan disciples.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together at the jab against his Sect. “Anyways, Wei WuXian was, I imagine, bored. He kept playing around and passing notes with Nie HuaiSang. That guy has not changed since he was a teenager, by the way. Maybe his face, but surely not his cowardly nature.” He said with a roll of his eyes. “Anyways, he got the Grandmaster’s attention, so Grandmaster Lan questioned him. First, he asked questions about general topics, then about cultivation.

“His question was as follows: *‘There was an executioner with parents, a wife, and children, but he executed more than a hundred people. Then he died in public, and his body was left alone for a week. With the repressed energy of resentment, he started to haunt and kill. What should be done?’*”

“There are three ways: liberate, suppress, eliminate.” Lan SiZhui said automatically.

“Of course, your answer is the same as Hanguang-Jun’s.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes and Lan SiZhui repressed a smile. “Anyways, Wei WuXian did not answer.”

“That is surprising. He was the first disciple of Yunmeng before... before.” Lan SiZhui said.

“He said that too.” Jin Ling nodded. “That he knew. He was just thinking of a fourth way!”

“A fourth way?” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Yes! He said: *‘Why not dig up those he killed and arouse their resentment, use them to fight the ghost?’*” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“I don’t understand. I thought he became the YiLing Patriarch not long before the war? Wasn’t that long after the GusuLan lectures ended?” Lan JingYi scoffed.

“Exactly!” Jin Ling exclaimed. Lan SiZhui realized he had not put up silencing charms, so he quickly did so. “He said: *‘Spiritual energy is energy. Resentful energy is also energy. Spiritual energy is in our body. So why can’t resentful energy also be used by humans?’*”

“I have never learned demonic cultivation, but that sounds like the principle of it.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Was he thinking about it for so long before he became the YiLing Patriarch?”

“That’s so cool!” Lan JingYi said, mouth open. At Lan SiZhui’s look he schooled himself. “I mean, evil. Very evil.”

“I do not think demonic cultivation is evil.” Lan SiZhui sighed. “I think there is reason in the principles. If one only looks at it that way, resentful energy is just energy, just like how the flow of the river can split rocks and create a course in mountains, that is energy.

“The problem is that while spiritual energy can be controlled by our conscience, resentful energy has intent. It cannot be controlled the same way. It requires a very powerful tool, such as Chenqing, and the Stygian Tiger Amulet. They were created by using Yin iron, which had sealed thousands of souls inside, therefore is the most powerful resentment filled spiritual

tool. This is why demonic cultivation is not practiced by a lot of people. Those who do take on too much damage to their body and mind. They do not survive for long.”

“When did you learn that?” Jin Ling frowned at him.

“Part of it is common sense.” Lan SiZhui said embarrassed he had to point it out. “Another part I have observed. Yet another part I have learned through my studies. And some I know from Hanguang-Jun, Wen Ning and Senior Wei themselves.”

“They taught you demonic cultivation?!” Lan JingYi’s mouth dropped open yet again. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Throughout the years when I had questions about dark energies, everyone shied away from answering except Hanguang-Jun. He always told me not to practice it, but he did teach me how to understand it. And after Senior Wei returned and we’ve learned his identity, I asked him questions as well. And Wen Ning, who was mostly present as Wei WuXian defined his cultivation method.”

“Wei WuXian said he had not figured out how to control it.” Jin Ling said. “And then Grandmaster threw him out.”

“Did you know about this?” Lan JingYi looked towards Lan SiZhui, who shook his head.

“I have heard very little of the YiLing Patriarch’s life before he gained his title.” He said honestly.

“Anyhow, if we want to go ahead and stop it from happening, we should shut down Wei WuXian’s interest now, shouldn’t we?” Jin Ling asked defiantly lifting his chin towards Lan SiZhui, daring him to say no.

“Jin Ling...”

“Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling glared at him. “Look, me and Lan JingYi want to save my parents. You’re either with us or against us.” He said challengingly.

“It’s not this simple.” Lan SiZhui argued. “I told you already. If we meddle with the past, who’s to say the future will be the same? Who knows if we get born if we change the flow of events?”

“Others would live though!” Lan JingYi said.

“My parents, for instance?!” Jin Ling agreed.

“I do want to save people. It’s not that I don’t. Of course, I wish they lived. But we can’t.”

“You’re truly just a coward!” Jin Ling glared at him and Lan JingYi scoffed at him for the harsh words. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes.

“Maybe I am. Why aren’t you afraid?” He looked up. “This war had changed the whole cultivation world. It wiped an entire Sect from the Earth.”

“Yes, your Sect!” Jin Ling exclaimed, frustrated. “Do you truly not care?!”

“Of course, I care!” Lan SiZhui snapped, then blushed at his own words and tempered himself. “I’m not saying this because I don’t. But you don’t see the whole picture. We’d save people now and our entire lives would disappear. All the good things that happened after the war. Who knows if it wouldn’t be worse if we changed history?”

“Do you think I care?”

“You should.” Lan SiZhui insisted. “Think about it, please. If Wen RuoHan and the Wen Sect won the war, maybe he’d enslave the Sects. Oppress them and strip them of their power. Maybe even kill them, everyone, not just those who would die of the war.”

“Then we’ll make sure that won’t happen!”

“How?” Lan SiZhui was suddenly tired. “Sect Leader Jin, while you have strong cultivation and we have the advantage of knowing events before they happened, we’re still just three juniors. We cannot win a war against powers that would destroy even the strongest Sects.”

“I’ll figure something out!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “And Lan JingYi will help. And if you’d grow a backbone, you’d be helping us, too, not just sit and meditate all day!”

“It is not easy for me to argue against the two of you.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “Your words speak to me as much as you believe in them. But I also understand that changing the past, meddling with time is dangerous and comes with unforeseen consequences.”

“I know that too!” Jin Ling snapped. “Do you think I want to die? Not be born?! Is your opinion so low of me you think I’m that stupid?!”

“Of course not, I—” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened.

“Then why don’t you think I understand the consequences?! But what do they matter? They’re unforeseen because I can’t predict how this will go.”

“So, you understand why it is not wise to do this.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling nodded seriously, leaning close to talk to Lan SiZhui clearly. “But just because it’s risky, it doesn’t mean it’s not right.” He leaned back. “How many night-hunts have you participated in? How many evil things have you faced, knowing it might kill you? Did you wave and say: ‘It’s too risky, who knows who might die’? Or did you go anyways and tried your best, because it is your duty?!” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer.

“SiZhui, Jin Ling is right.” Lan JingYi said carefully. “Not the way he said it,” he threw a dirty look at Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes and looked away, “but what he said is true. If it means saving all those people, I am willing to take the risk of changing the past.”

“Me too.” Jin Ling said challengingly. “So, you either help us or not.”

“We won’t change our minds.” Lan JingYi said, as if reading in Lan SiZhui’s thoughts, or maybe just in his searching gaze. “Please, Lan SiZhui. Help us.” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer.

“So,” Jin Ling raised his voice, looking over at Lan JingYi, “the first task is to stop Wei WuXian from becoming the YiLing Patriarch.”

“If we were to stop the war, or the battle after that, we wouldn’t gain anything from stopping Wei WuXian becoming the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation. Remember, it turned out he was not the one responsible for the deaths.” Lan JingYi answered.

“Do you really believe that?” Jin Ling asked with a frown. It wasn’t as malicious as usually. More curious. Lost.

“Don’t you, Sect Leader Jin?” Lan SiZhui’s forehead wrinkled.

“I...” Jin Ling started, then halted. “It’s not that I don’t think Jin GuangYao manipulated the situation.” He started, frustrated. Probably because he couldn’t find the words he was looking for. “I do. It’s just...” He halted again. “It doesn’t add up.” He said in the end.

“What doesn’t?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Jin GuangYao was not in possession of any Yin Iron. Wei WuXian had his Chenqing and Stygian Tiger Amulet, yet Su She controlled the resentful energy? *How?*”

“Sect Leader Jin, you were the only one present when it had been properly told.” Lan SiZhui said. “We’ve only heard the official statements.”

“Yeah...” Jin Ling looked away.

“Do you have a theory?” Lan SiZhui asked carefully.

“Why are we talking about it?” Lan JingYi scoffed. “It had been declared, Wei WuXian had been excused of his crimes.”

“I think he still did it.” Jin Ling said. “I think he lost control. Su She’s manipulation might’ve escalated it, but...”

Lan SiZhui looked away. He had never heard the story told from any other perspective, only dry facts of history. Jin Ling had grown up with the tragic tales of how his mother and father had lost their lives. He probably had more perspective than anyone else from their generation – it was not his place to judge the situation.

“Hanguang-Jun said Wei WuXian is not a bad person. From what I’ve seen of him, I found he is not either.” Lan JingYi argued. “Why are you questioning him?”

“Hanguang-Jun is not perfect either!” Jin Ling glared at him. “Why would you believe him more than anyone?!”

“Sect Leader Jin, Lan JingYi, please stop fighting. There is no point.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. “Lan JingYi. Sect Leader Jin has his own opinion on the matter as do you and as do I. Please, let him freely make his own judgements.”

“Do you agree with him?” Lan JingYi frowned at him. Lan SiZhui shook his head and looked down.

“I don’t agree with either of you. It is not a matter to agree on. We do not know everything.”

“I know enough! And Hanguang-Jun was there. If he says Wei WuXian is a good person, I’ll believe him.”

“I didn’t say he was a bad person!” Jin Ling snapped. “Can’t a good person do bad things?”

“Like your uncle?” Lan JingYi glared back at him.

“My uncle, what are you talking about?!” Jin Ling scoffed. “Don’t get bold, Lan JingYi!”

Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “The point is, I don’t think stopping Wei WuXian’s actions would help the situation, if we want to stop the war as well. I think we should start by stopping Wen RuoHan from overpowering the Sects in the first place.”

“So, how do we do that?” Jin Ling asked, challenging. “It’s not like we can go against the entire Sect before the war even begins.”

“There must be something we can do.” Lan JingYi frowned, rubbing his chin in thought.

For a long moment, everyone was quiet. Lan SiZhui felt like this would be when he inserted something that would make the others realize the solution, but that would also mean he’d openly contribute to this crazy idea. But...

But really, was he determined enough to stop Lan JingYi and Jin Ling? It really wasn’t that he didn’t agree with them, that he didn’t want to save these people. He did, really much so! But wanting and doing were different things. Wishing he could help, staying on the sidelines and just watching it happen... It would fill him with regrets and pain and guilt. But he’d also know he did what he was supposed to. Like ZeWu-Jun said, it was impossible to decide what was right and what wasn’t. If he didn’t meddle with time, he’d do right by those who lived a happy future. If he did meddle, he’d do right by the people who died in war.

How was he supposed to pick? How was he supposed to know what was right, what was wrong?

But... Jin Ling and Lan JingYi were determined to act. And while Lan SiZhui was torn about his own situation, trying to stay opinionated in their faces... Perhaps it was a petty excuse to say: *‘Shouldn’t I at least help them, so they don’t get into too much trouble? Since they’ve already decided, why should I still have to choose? Why couldn’t I just agree, just to keep them as safe as possible, stop them from doing too much damage?’*

“The Yin Iron.” He said quietly.

“Huh?” Lan JingYi frowned at him.

“Stop him from taking possession of the Yin Iron he used to raise his deviant army.”



“Oh, so now you have ideas to help us?!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Young Mistress!” Lan JingYi scolded.

“What?” Jin Ling huffed. “And stop calling me that!” He added as an afterthought.

“Lan SiZhui doesn’t want to help and you don’t like it, Lan SiZhui wants to help and you also disapprove. Make up your mind already!”

“Didn’t I just say I wanted his help?! How is that not making up my mind?” Before Lan JingYi could say anything, Lan SiZhui inserted:

“According to textbooks, the Shards had been hidden in the world. Wen Xu and Wen Chao had been tasked by Wen RuoHan to find them. The books don’t say when this all happened, but they say spy birds were not uncommon to be seen at this time.”

“If that is the case, we should find the shards of the Yin Iron before him.” Lan JingYi said. “I have never learned where he got them. Do you know?” Lan JingYi looked at the two of them.

“I only know the Stygian Tiger Amulet was made of it.” Jin Ling shrugged. “But Wei WuXian had possession of that piece. That’s one. He used to have three. So, ideas?” Jin Ling looked around them, but they shook their heads.

“Wait! Didn’t they have a piece here in the Cloud Recesses?” Lan JingYi suddenly exclaimed. Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Wouldn’t have Sect Leader Lan or the Grandmaster notice that?”

“Maybe they know, they just don’t want anyone else to know.” Jin Ling offered.

“Ah, that makes sense.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Then should we ask them?”

“We wouldn’t be able to explain how we know.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “But if it is here, we could be able to find it ourselves. The Yin Iron is an extremely resentful tool. In order to keep it hidden one must put up a very strong ward. However, because it is so powerful, a small ward wouldn’t be able to contain it. We’re looking for a place that is big enough but also hidden.”

“The back mountains?” Lan JingYi offered. Lan SiZhui thought about it before shrugging.

“It is possible. We should check soon.”

“I can check tomorrow while you finish your punishments.” Jin Ling said.

“Ah, but Sect Leader Jin, the back mountains are restricted. It is not forbidden to enter but only Lan Sect members should.”

“Fine.” Jin Ling huffed. “We’ll go together later then.” They all agreed and with that, the topic had been closed. Lan SiZhui found that he did not mind all that much they were trying

it. After all, they had a fair chance of not succeeding, but at least they'd try. Lan SiZhui's conscience might remain clear, after all, and he wouldn't have to chose between two evils.

## Responsibility II.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next day went on quietly. It was Lan SiZhui's last day of punishment and he was ready for it to end. He'd done plenty of copies doing the handstand, but doing it for four days straight had been exhausting. His back was hurting, so were his shoulders. He imagined a trip to Cold Spring would be welcome at the end of the day to rest after the long days spent upside down.

Lan JingYi was getting tired as well. His breaks were more frequent, not quite meeting the hour mark, but Hanguang-Jun hadn't called them out on it. Lan SiZhui spent the breaks meditating, trying to channel his healing, but it helped little. He was so sore he agreed with Lan JingYi's sentiment from the other day – he could rest for days after this.

Jin Ling and Wei WuXian were quiet as the day went on, then left for lunch and their classes with Hanguang-Jun. At the end of the day, nobody lingered. Jin Ling went back to the guest quarters after classes and spent the night with his Sect. Lan JingYi went to his rooms right after dinner with the promise of sleeping like a baby that night.

The next morning Lan SiZhui found himself missing Lan JingYi's usual company. He was used to not having him by his side at all times, but he usually found other company as well. They didn't have a whole lot of friends, but they were friendly with some people from their age group. It was strange, being amongst strangers. They all wore the Lan Sect uniform, but other than that, there was barely any familiarity to these people for Lan SiZhui. If he was lucky, he gazed on a disciple who was his senior in the future, but because of the Wen Sect, many people he'd met now were dead in the future.

He had lunch with them, then finally a welcome distraction, the Lan Guest Lectures. He wasn't sure he was welcome, but there were some empty seats. He'd arrived early, like most Lan disciples, and sat facing the Grandmaster, who was writing something – probably letters – at his desk. Slowly, guest disciples started showing up, Jin Ling, Jin ZiXuan and the Jiang Sect included. Before Jin Ling could make his way to Lan SiZhui though, he'd noticed another group.

They had white guest robes on, like most guest disciples. On the Jiang Sect's robes, a nine-petaled lotus flower was embroidered with purple, while the Nie Sect wore the head of a beast on their shoulders in grey. The Jin Sect, despite not doing so during the Introduction Ceremony, now also wore their guest robes with the peony embroidered with a golden thread. The group Lan SiZhui's eyes caught on had the symbol of the sun sewn into their white guest robes with blood red thread.

It took him an embarrassingly long time to recognize the Wen Sect's disciples. There were only three of them, a woman and two men. The men didn't look happy to be there, while the woman appeared nonchalant about it.

Lan SiZhui had heard, of course, about how the first year the Wen Sect had sent disciples since the first lectures of the Lan Sect, had been the one when Wei WuXian had attended. Still, seeing his former Sect here, alive, normal... Although they weren't welcomed warmly, that much was sure from the frowns or how they ducked into the pavilion without anyone stopping them for idle chatter.

"Ah, I meant to tell you." Jin Ling was standing by his table, arms crossed, a frown in place. "So many things had happened, it slipped my mind."

"Do you..." Lan SiZhui started hesitantly, not quite able to get himself to say the words.

"That is Wen Qing. She's the one who's officially attending. The two behind her must be her guards or something, most of the time they stay in their rooms though."

"Wen Qing..." Lan SiZhui swallowed thickly.

"What? A distant cousin?" Jin Ling frowned down at him. Lan SiZhui just nodded, which seemed to catch Jin Ling by surprise and he stiffened. "Apparently, they caused quite a scene when arriving." He scoffed after a respectful pause. The place of an apology. "That dog, Wen Chao was with them."

"Don't insult others." Lan SiZhui said distractedly.

"What? He is. Don't you remember? He was the one to—" He cut himself off, and made a hand gesture. "You know."

"I remember." Lan SiZhui nodded.

"Well then, why can't I call him what he is? He's a dog."

"Se—Young Master Jin, unless you want to get more punishment..."

"Okay, fine, I get it!" He groaned. "Stupid Lan Sect rules." He huffed, then without any parting words, headed towards his table where the Jin Sect disciples had already settled. Lan SiZhui shook his head, preparing his materials like he did for every class.

The lecture was – and Lan SiZhui would rather bear another *year* of handstands than admitting it to even a rock on the top of a lonely mountain – boring. For one, it was material he already knew, also the same lecture he'd sat through in the future, when he was attending these lectures himself. Secondly, they were watched closely by four senior brothers, one for each Sect. When Wei WuXian as much as moved, the senior brother at the front of their row sent him a sharp look and tensed. The same thing happened when Nie HuaiSang or Wen Qing or Jin Ling had. On one hand it was fascinating, but it also meant that Nie HuaiSang dozed behind his fan and Wei WuXian slept obnoxiously, leaning his head in his fist.

Their boredom seemed to subdue the whole class. Even Lan WangJi didn't pay as rapt attention. Lan SiZhui knew it from the way he absently fingered his textbook, like he wanted to flip the page but the Grandmaster wasn't finished covering what was on the current one – which meant Hanguang-Jun had read the passage instead of listening to it and was ready to

read the whole book by the time Grandmaster delved into the next topic, despite knowing the whole book by heart.

Their first break came suddenly for those who weren't paying attention. It was Jin ZiXuan who made it obvious to everyone who wasn't listening to Grandmaster declaring it was time to break by standing up. Lan SiZhui flinched at the Young Master Jin's movement and felt his cheeks heat up from the knowledge he was one of those who didn't pay attention.

"Ah, finally." Someone groaned as Lan SiZhui stepped out with the other students. Jin Ling appeared by his side. He didn't pay attention, because another movement took it – red embroidery on white robes. Wen Qing was the only one who didn't mix with other disciples. Even Lan Wangji was brought into a conversation – as one sided as it seemed – with one of Sect Leader Nie's... no, simply just *a* Nie disciple.

"Ah, Lan SiZhui." Wei WuXian sneaked up on them unnoticed, and as Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling turned to look at him – one caught off guard, the other frowning – they noticed Nie HuaiSang and Jiang WanYin hovering nearby. Wei WuXian straightened and bumped shoulders with him. "Do you like Lady Wen?" He asked quietly with a teasing grin, nodding towards Wen Qing. Lan SiZhui pulled his eyebrows together.

"I don't know her." He shook his head confused. Jin Ling scoffed.

"Shameless! She's his cousin!" He said, and suddenly realization dawned on Lan SiZhui. He felt his face heat and he took a step back – or two – and looked down, fiercely not looking at Wen Qing. Or Wei WuXian. Or anyone. Ever again, if he could help it. Of course, Wei WuXian didn't know she was his cousin at this time, so he couldn't blame him assuming he was staring at her because he found her pretty – which he did! Just not *like that*.

"Oh." Wei WuXian sounded more than surprised. Perhaps a little... disappointed. Why? "Excuse me then. I... Lan SiZhui, I don't mean to pry, but... how?" He frowned when Lan SiZhui looked up. Lan SiZhui looked over at Jin Ling then, hopefully communicating his disapproval. Jin Ling seemed to realize he let his mouth run again and tapped himself on the lips, looking away.

"Young Master Wei, forgive this disciple, I do not want to talk about it." Lan SiZhui bowed to Wei WuXian formally, which drew some attention, but it wasn't interesting enough to keep it there, too.

"I see." Wei WuXian looked towards Wen Qing with a furrowed brow.

"Wei WuXian, are you bullying the Lan again?!" Jiang WanYin came over, glaring at his brother.

"Ah, Jiang Cheng!" Wei WuXian's expression changed, as if it was wiped off, and he turned to his brother with a pout. "Lan SiZhui and I are friends!"

"Who would want to be your friend?" The biting words were accompanied by a familiar scowl but none of the familiar heat as he sent a look towards Lan SiZhui.

“Jiang Cheng, we’re already friends.” Wei WuXian said as if it was obvious, and for emphasis, he threw an arm over Lan SiZhui’s shoulder. He bore it because it wasn’t polite to shake him off, even if it was quite uncomfortable on his sore shoulders. “Aren’t we, Lan SiZhui?” Wei WuXian grinned at him and Lan SiZhui smiled politely, not saying anything.

“See that?” Jiang WanYin huffed. It sounded triumphant.

“Hey, Lan SiZhui, don’t be so cold!” Wei WuXian pouted and squeezed his shoulder. It was rather painful, but Lan SiZhui tried not to show it. It was his own fault anyways, the punishment. The next moment Jin Ling was next to them, prying Wei WuXian’s hand off Lan SiZhui and huffing annoyed.

“Stop harassing him! Wasn’t it enough that you teased him for so long? Now that he doesn’t have punishment anymore, he should get a break from your crazy!”

“Young Master Jin, it’s okay.” Lan SiZhui was quick to say. “I do not mind Young Master Wei’s teasing.”

“Of course not!” Jin Ling crossed his arms across his chest. “He’s your—” He bit off the rest of the sentence. “You’re too nice anyways!” He snapped irritably at his own slip-up. Lan SiZhui looked down.

“Why are you so angry, brother Jin?” Wei WuXian frowned at them.

“Who’s angry?!” Jin Ling snapped at him then, eyes wide. Lan SiZhui let out a barely audible sigh, but somehow Wei WuXian caught on it.

“You’re making Lan SiZhui upset!” He scolded gently. “Lower your voice!”

“You’re the one keeping to the rules now, are you?!” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui warned him quietly when he saw Grandmaster look up from his letter inside. He touched Jin Ling’s arm, who looked to him in question and he shook his head subtly.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “You were hurting him, so I don’t feel bad about it.” Wei WuXian’s eyes widened.

“I was hurting him?! When?”

“He’d just had…” Jin Ling started, but Lan SiZhui shook his head at him. “Whatever!” Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. “You didn’t even notice, so what do you care?” Lan SiZhui knew it was slowly time to get back and it was a good distraction as well, so he turned to Wei WuXian and his company.

“Young Masters, let us go back to the lectures.” He said kindly with a bow.

“So polite!” Nie HuaiSang sighed, but with a twist of his fan, he nudged Wei WuXian. “Brother Wei, brother Lan is right, let’s go.” With that, they filtered back into the room.



“Just go and talk to her!” Jin Ling snapped as they stood in front of the Lanshi. They were on a break from Lan QiRen’s class the next day. This time, Wei WuXian left him alone, engaging with his family instead. Lan SiZhui wondered if it was because of his relation to the Wen Sect Wei WuXian learned about the day before. Back then, he looked disappointed.

“Talk to who, Young Master Jin?” He asked, turning away from Wen Qing. Jin Ling glared at him pointedly. Lan SiZhui sighed. “Young Master Jin, I’m not sure what I’d say to her. It’s not like she knows me.”

“Not yet anyways, but you’re her cousin.” Jin Ling scoffed. Lan SiZhui looked away. “I’ve talked to... Jin ZiXuan.” Jin Ling said unexpectedly and Lan SiZhui looked at him in interest. “It wasn’t a grand talk.” He huffed. “I apologized for being an embarrassment. He just nodded. Then I asked him if he was going to say anything and he said: *‘Your case does not require my attention anymore. Leave me alone.’*”

“Are you alright?” Lan SiZhui asked, concerned. That must’ve been unpleasant. Jin Ling snorted.

“I take worse words from my uncle!” He said proudly. “I’m actually relieved. I thought he’d be this great, kind guy, kind of like you and I’d feel much worse about my character. It turns out he’s just like me, if a bit calmer about it.” He shrugged. Lan SiZhui thought *‘a bit calmer’* was an understatement, but he wasn’t the kind to tease. He smiled instead, happy that Jin Ling felt close to his father.

“I am happy for you, Young Master Jin.”

“Yeah, well.” Jin Ling sniffed and looked away. “I still haven’t spoken to mo—Lady Jiang yet. I don’t know how to approach her. I don’t know half as much about her as about my father. Uncle only talked about her when he asked me what she would think of my behavior. When I asked what she was like, he would just send me away.”

“It is a good opportunity to get to know her then.”

“If only I could talk to her!” He looked over at the Yunmeng Sect disciples. “The other morning we’ve ran into each other at the guest quarters. Me and Wei WuXian... anyways, I turned to apologize to her and both her brothers stood in front of her as if to shield her from me.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Perhaps next time you shouldn’t fight with Wei WuXian before trying to talk to her?” Lan SiZhui offered shyly but teasingly.

“Whatever!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “And how is this about me again?! We were talking about you just now. How did you turn it around?” He sounded honestly baffled, that Lan SiZhui didn’t have the heart to tell him he was the one who changed the subject first.

“I apologize for my clever tongue, Young Master Jin.” He said bowing, trying to repress a smile. Jin Ling huffed.

“You better.” There was a pause. “Lan JingYi finishes his punishment today, doesn’t he?” He asked as if he didn’t spend time with him during his breaks since yesterday. Lan SiZhui knew, because this morning Lan JingYi complained about it to him on their way, Lan SiZhui for his classes, Lan JingYi for punishment.

“We should allow him a day to rest before starting our search.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Uncharacteristically, Jin Ling nodded seriously as well. Then it was time to get back to class, and both boys heaved a sigh as they entered the Lanshi.



“What are we looking for, again?” Lan JingYi asked as they picked their way through the back mountains. The Lan disciples knew them well, so Jin Ling trailed after them, annoyed with every rock and root that stood in his way.

“A ward that could shield the Yin Iron’s resentful energy. It must be big, but also hidden.”

“A cave?” Jin Ling offered.

“Perhaps.” Lan SiZhui stopped and thought. “There is a bear cave on the west ridge. A series of natural caves craved by the rivers on the northwest mountain. A couple of bat caves around the eastern mountains.”

“And the Cold Pond Cave.” Lan JingYi added and Lan SiZhui solemnly nodded.

“Cold Pond Cave?” Jin Ling asked, curious. “That sounds important.”

“It is a sacred place of the Lan Sect. Warded against anyone who wishes to enter but isn’t a Lan. During the war, when Cloud Recesses were burned down, the Sect elders with the main family had taken shelter there. In the end, Hanguang-Jun sacrificed himself. He had been taken prisoner and the elders survived for it.”

Jin Ling didn’t have smart words for that, and Lan SiZhui appreciated the respectful silence.

“Should we look there first?” Lan JingYi asked after a respectable time passed. “I imagine if I wanted to hide something in the Cloud Recesses of this power, I’d hide it there.”

“Unfortunately for us, I do not know the way in.”

“How is that possible?” Jin Ling frowned at Lan SiZhui. “Aren’t you the first disciple?”

“I’ve only heard the stories. I’ve never been shown the way. It is said it is in the main mountains, but I do not know where exactly.”

“Which are the main mountains anyways?” Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“The six main mountains of the Cloud Recesses are Liming, Zaoshang, Zhengwu, Xiawu, Wanjian and Wuye. The two that frames the entrance are Zaoshang and Wanjian. The four others are around it. Cloud Recesses, directly, is placed on Liming.” Lan JingYi told Jin Ling with perfect textbook memory, and Lan SiZhui nodded approvingly.



When Lan JingYi first arrived to the Cloud Recesses, this had been his first lesson. Lan SiZhui having learned it at a much younger age, helped him memorize it. It was the only lesson Lan JingYi could recite without a pause or hesitation.

“What stupid names for mountains.” Jin Ling scoffed, but did not mean it.

“The Cold Pond Cave could be on either of them.” Lan SiZhui said. “I doubt they’re on the entrance mountains, but it still leaves four back mountains that are vast. It would take months to search them, especially since it is said to be cloaked.” Which he was secretly glad about, because it meant they would not stir up trouble until then.

“So, we have no way of finding the shard. Why are we out here then?” Not that Lan SiZhui thought he regretted missing the first half of the lectures.

“It is not necessarily in the Cold Pond Cave.” Lan SiZhui said. “Wouldn’t that be so obvious?”

“Hm.” Lan JingYi nodded, looking around. “Let’s look around. If anyone finds a ward they can’t or can pass, signal the others.”

“I’m going that way.” Jin Ling pointed towards the mountain path that was the flattest. It led to a valley between Xiawu and Zhengwu. It was probably the least dangerous path to take.

“I’m going to the Flowing Lakes. Maybe the cave entrance is hidden behind a waterfall.” Lan SiZhui offered. Lan JingYi nodded. It left him to go the farthest from the Cloud Recesses, towards the rural Zhengwu, but Lan SiZhui wasn’t worried. Lan JingYi spent as much time in the mountains as him, they knew them well. “Everyone be careful. Be on your guards.”

“It would be easier if I had a sword.” Jin Ling grunted as he turned towards where he would be headed. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look, but there was hardly anything they could do. Lan JingYi couldn’t give up Zhameng and Lan SiZhui couldn’t give up Yingjiu, his sword.

They parted and so the search began. It was fruitless, that first day.

Each mountain that framed the Cloud Recesses had a different energy, a different natural defense against intruders. That is why it was built here. It was a natural shelter from the outside world, framed by mountains that sat atop energy lines. It was as if each had their own personality.

Liming was welcoming, but foggy. If an intruder would want to find their way in the fog, they could easily fall into their death without noticing.

Zaoshang was eerie, foggy and cold. The name truly fit the mountain, for it was as the morning in the winter. If one stayed long enough, they could freeze to death there.

Zhengwu was gentle and green, but also rural. It’s dense forests easily distracted an intruder and led them in circles.



Zaoshang, one of the entrance mountains, and below it Caiyi Town. To the right was Gusu and the river was a faint line connecting the two and stretching further westward, towards Yunmeng. To north were hills upon hills, grain and rice fields. Towards east he saw even more mountains. The horizon faded, until it was one with the sky.

Hearing a noise behind him, he tore himself away from the most beautiful view in the Cloud Recesses and turned, anxiety kicking up. Lady Wen came here as well? He saw no one. Still, his heart beat and erratic rhythm and he headed towards the path by the other cliff, next to the river, hoping to get even further away... only to bump into something and fall back!

It was truly just by accident he'd found it, and for a moment, he just sat there, heart racing as he tried to process what just happened.

When he started towards the path, he kept glancing back to see if Lady Wen would appear. He did not pay any attention, just headed towards the general direction of the path, which in hindsight had been quite foolish of him, with the boulder-framed river so close. And indeed, he headed towards the river and would've fallen into his death, breaking himself into pieces by unforgiving stone formations and the flow of river, not to mention the formation dipped downwards, part of it underground, part of it towards the Flowing Lakes.

If it wasn't for the ward he'd ran into, he'd have died for sure! But here he was, alive and relieved. Because as much as the Sect cared about safety, they warned people away from the mountain paths instead of putting up barriers around each dangerous place. The wards were not there to protect people from the fatal fall. There was only one thing Lan SiZhui could think of that would need protecting from the outside.

He was too shaken up to really examine it – and perhaps Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were rubbing off on him, because he was, he noted, way too excited to do so as well. He wanted to let the others know he'd found it, so he turned, intending to send a messenger butterfly or run down the mountain...

Just to find himself face-to-face with Lady Wen.

There was a long, long pause. Lan SiZhui looked at the Lady and the Lady was looking at him. In the end, he remembered his manners and bowed deeply.

"Lady Wen, welcome." She didn't answer, so eventually, he straightened. She was beautiful. She had big, wide eyes, full, pouty lips and gentle face. Instead of her guest robes, she was wearing blood-red Wen robes, which Lan SiZhui had never seen before. "Lady Wen, the back mountains are restricted because these paths are dangerous. Even us, Lan disciples don't come here often. Please, let me see you safely off the mountain." He bowed again.

"If you don't come here either, why are you here?"

"I... I..." Lan SiZhui stuttered, looking down.

"If it's so dangerous, don't play around here either."

“Ah, thank you for your concern, Lady Wen. I grew up here, so I’m confident I can avoid the more dangerous places.” He looked up at her, but she wasn’t looking at him. “Lady Wen, may I ask you why are you here?”

She took a long pause. Then, without an answer, she turned and walked away. Lan SiZhui blinked after her, unsure if he should stay or follow and make sure she made it off the mountain safely. In the end, he’d hesitated for too long, and he had his own business to worry about, so he pulled out butterfly messengers and sent them off to find Lan JingYi and Jin Ling.

He waited for quite some time. After what felt like an hour, a messenger butterfly found him. He caught it and relayed the message.

“We ran into Wei WuXian and Nie HuaiSang at the Flowing Lakes. I tried to stay behind, but Wei WuXian insisted he come with me if I go up the mountain and I didn’t want us to deal with him. We left to go back. Let us meet in your rooms for dinner. Lan JingYi.”

Lan SiZhui sighed, turning back to the barrier. He didn’t want to leave here, too anxious someone else might run into the wards and discover the Yin Iron before them. He turned back towards it and sat in front of it in a meditation pose, letting his Golden Core explore the spiritual energies. There was the protection, of course. Some resentful energy, which was reasonable if the Yin Iron was stored there.

He tested the barriers with his spiritual energy. After a few hours, he still couldn’t breach them, so he gave up. It was already dark when he opened his eyes, so he hurried down the mountain. The Cloud Recesses were passed dinner. He sighed upon entering, thinking he might send a message to Lan JingYi and Jin Ling that he was fine. He needn’t to, because nearing his rooms he heard voices.

“I’m not waiting here past curfew.” Jin Ling.

“Now, you suddenly care about curfew?” Lan JingYi.

“I told you we should’ve went back the moment we parted from Wei WuXian. Who knows if your messenger found Lan SiZhui at all?”

“My messenger charm is flawless! Of course, it found SiZhui! There must be some other reason for his delay.”

“Do you think Grandmaster took him and sent him off somewhere as well?”

Lan SiZhui finally rounded the corner and came into view. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were sitting in front of his room, empty, discarded trays in front of them along with one that was still half-full. Lan JingYi was just lifting a piece of tofu from it to pop it into his mouth when they noticed Lan SiZhui, and he dropped it, hopping on his feet with Jin Ling.

“Lan SiZhui!” He cried, relieved. Jin Ling glared at him.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?!” He demanded and Lan SiZhui repressed a fond smile at their concern.

“Young Master Jin, Lan JingYi, I apologize for worrying you.” He bowed to them.

“Don’t apologize! Tell us where you were!”

“Yeah, we were really worried!” Lan JingYi’s mouth pulled downwards.

“I’m not exactly sure about the time, how much do we have until curfew?”

“It’s just past dinner.” Lan JingYi said, looking around. “Most brothers had returned. I’d say around a stick of incense’s time.”

“Let us go inside then.” Lan SiZhui nodded, going past them to open the door. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling took up all three trays and carried them inside. Lan SiZhui closed the door and put up some silencing charms before sitting across the other two. They placed his tray in front of him, but eying the tofu Lan JingYi just dropped, he decided to talk first. “I apologize for being late. You should’ve gone to somewhere more comfortable to eat.”

“We ate, does it matter where?” Jin Ling huffed, gesturing at Lan SiZhui’s tray. “We got you some too. Be grateful.” Even though half of it had been eaten by Lan JingYi.

“Thank you for thinking of me. As for where I was...” He looked down. “After I received your message, I felt anxious to leave. I wanted to see if I can breach the wards on my own, but I was unsuccessful. We will need to go around and see if we can find the hidden entrance.”

“You were the one who said we shouldn’t do this alone.” Jin Ling fumed. “Why didn’t you send for us?”

“I figured since you’ve come back, it would be a long time until you returned. I didn’t mean to do it on my own, I just wanted to test it.”

“We’ll test it together!” Jin Ling huffed. “Don’t try to sabotage the mission!”

“Young Mistress!” Lan JingYi glared at him. “I told you SiZhui wasn’t like that.”

“Sect Leader Jin, although I do not agree that we should change the past, I won’t betray you.” Lan SiZhui told him seriously, a little hurt by Jin Ling’s mistrust.

“I know that.” Jin Ling looked away. “It’s not that. I just... Just don’t go there without us again, okay?” Lan SiZhui saw that he regretted his words, even though he didn’t apologize. And it wasn’t in Lan SiZhui’s nature to hold grudges, so he nodded.

“Of course.” He said quietly.

“Lan SiZhui, Wei WuXian earlier mentioned Lady Wen was up where you’ve sent the messengers from before we got there. Have you met her?” Lan JingYi asked curiously. Lan SiZhui looked down.

“You did?” Jin Ling’s eyebrows rose and he shared a look with Lan JingYi. “Have you finally talked to her, or the two of you just stood there, looking at the ground?”

“She warned me not to play around in dangerous places, then I asked her reasons for being up on the mountain. At that, she left without parting words.”

“How cold!” Lan JingYi’s eyes widened.

“Well, you shouldn’t have pried!” Jin Ling glared.

“Lan SiZhui is a responsible disciple. Of course, he asked!” Lan JingYi scoffed.

“It was stupid!”

“You’re stupid.” Lan JingYi frowned at his friend. “It would have been suspicious if he doesn’t ask, besides, what else would he have said? ‘You’re my cousin when I get born in a year, wanna talk about it?’”

“Obviously not that!”

“It’s alright.” Lan SiZhui inserted with a small smile. “I don’t remember her much. Maybe we weren’t close when we knew each other anyways.”

“You were close with Wen Ning!” Jin Ling argued. “He’s her little brother. I bet she cared about you. You’re a fool for missing this chance.”

“Hey!” Lan JingYi scoffed. “Must you insult everyone?”

“Must, I mustn’t, but I can call out stupidity if I wish!”

“Sect Leader Jin, Lan JingYi, it’s alright. Please don’t fight on my behalf. It’s almost curfew. You should head back and rest.”

“Fine.” Jin Ling huffed and stood, clearly weary. Lan JingYi reluctantly followed. “Tomorrow we will look for the entrance together.”

“Yes.” With that, they parted for the night.

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“Is this a good idea?” Jin Ling frowned.

“Why are you asking?” Lan JingYi glared. “It was your idea!”

“It was a joke!”

“It was smart.” Lan SiZhui said calmly, finally breaking up the fight between the two. It’s been almost a week since he’d found the wards at the back mountains and they were hopeless. Almost a month into their stay in the past and they’ve hardly made any process. Something had to break sooner or later, so Lan SiZhui welcomed any new ideas. Even he got

bored of hiking the mountains all day long, and even though he would've liked to drag this out more, he needed a change of scenery.

And it wasn't like none of them thought about this, at least he did, for sure. Even though it was strange coming from Jin Ling, it was a sound idea and he was secretly glad for once he wasn't the one to suggest something like this. They've been sitting around, trying to come up with new ideas. When none came, Jin Ling said, frustrated and mocking:

*"I bet this can't be solved with your precious research."*

When he noticed none of them seemed to take the joke for what it was, he groaned and complained, but in the end, joined them to the library.

"So, what are we looking for exactly?" Lan JingYi asked with a frown.

"Anything to do with wards and hidden entrances..." Lan SiZhui thought for a moment. "The books about wards and barrier spells should be here." He went over to one of the selves and pointed.

"I'll look at those." Jin Ling offered.

"Good. Lan JingYi. You look into cloaking spells and disorientation charms."

"At the western wing." Lan JingYi nodded, knowing already where to look for disorientation charms, and turned to head that way.

"What are you going to look at?" Jin Ling asked, turning back from the shelf, a book already in his hand.

"History." Lan SiZhui said. It was the most hideous, with no concrete information. He was going to search for any mention of the Cold Pond Cave. He went to the western wing, which was the farthest from the entrance and worked his way towards it. History books didn't have their own section, being scattered all over the sections according to whether they had relevant information about the theme of the shelf they were on.

It took them days to go through all the books. He'd found two books that mentioned the cave, but no clue about how to enter. Jin Ling found nothing so far, nor did Lan JingYi. It was only dumb luck the day they did was when they've ran into Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian for the first time in days outside the lectures.

"I have one more section left." Lan SiZhui told Jin Ling at his question as of how much did he have to look through as they headed for the library after lunch.

"I have a couple of books left, but I think I'm close." Lan JingYi said.

"Well, all my books are as long as *Righteousness* itself. It took me three days to finish one!" Jin Ling complained. "If I knew research was so boring, I'd have never brought it up."

"At least, now we're doing something productive. Even if we don't find the answers we're looking for, we'll know more than we started." Lan SiZhui recited Lan QiRen's words from

when he taught them how to effectively search for information in books. Lan JingYi recognized the phrase and rolled his eyes.

As Lan SiZhui opened the door, he froze immediately, meeting the cold, steely gaze of his adoptive father. He hesitated, feeling Jin Ling shift behind him, then finally he bowed, the two behind him following suit.

“Han—Second Young Master Lan.”

“Lan SiZhui!” Wei WuXian exclaimed from his table. Jin Ling pushed past Lan SiZhui and turned to him, hands on his hips as he glared at his uncle.

“What are you doing here?” He scoffed. “Didn’t your punishment end when mine had?” Jin Ling and Wei WuXian were about a hundred and fifty copies in, but with time, they both got used to routine and copied faster and faster, knowing the rules well enough. It wouldn’t take them a month, at most two or so weeks to finish their punishment completely. They usually worked in the mornings, so seeing Wei WuXian here in the afternoon was strange.

“Ah, as if! I got extra punishment for mouthing off during the lecture yesterday.” Wei WuXian pouted. “I am to do ten more copies, so today I’m here. What are you doing here?”

“It’s none of your business!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Do not disturb other’s punishment.” Lan WangJi said as he returned to his own books. “Work quietly.” He must’ve heard them talking about research just now in front of the library doors. Lan SiZhui bowed to him, then nodded to the others. While they returned where they’ve been working for the past few days, Lan SiZhui stayed in this section with Wei WuXian and Hanguang-Jun.

He collected all books on history from the section and settled at the table Jin Ling worked at in the mornings. Wei WuXian looked over at him, but finding him deep in work, left him to it.

“Lan SiZhui!” Jin Ling jogged over from his section, but at Lan WangJi’s glance, he slowed. He was holding two scrolls. He settled across Lan SiZhui, putting the scrolls on top of his own book. He opened one. “Look here. Suppressing Ward.” He pointed at a section and Lan SiZhui read it.

“Mm.” Lan SiZhui hummed as he studied the text. He had his own thoughts about it, but before sharing them, he turned back to Jin Ling. Seeing he was finished, Jin Ling opened the other scroll. Before Lan SiZhui could start reading, Lan JingYi showed up behind Jin Ling and dropped next to him, with a book and a scroll of his own.

“Ah, Young Mistress, have you actually managed to find something?” He teased. Jin Ling elbowed him in the side.

“Shut up. The other one is about breaking through any kinds of wards.” He addressed Lan SiZhui.



“What have you got, JingYi?” Lan SiZhui nodded, putting the scrolls aside.

“Ah, look here.” He opened the book and started reading, then made a sound. “...here, *‘using this the object can be disguised as anything else, a scroll could appear as an apple...’*” He trailed off, dropping the book in front of Lan SiZhui. “I found this, but then I thought what we’re looking for is much bigger than an apple, so I cross referenced with a talisman book. This is what I’ve been figuring out for two days now.” He opened the scroll. “If you combine this spell with this... ah, here.” He put the scroll in front of Lan SiZhui. He pulled it closer.

“Who would combine a spell with a talisman?” Jin Ling frowned. “They cancel each other out, do they not?”

“Of course, not.” The answer came from the side. The teens looked over at Wei WuXian, who was seemingly doodling on what was supposed to be one of his copies. It was strange, having company after working for days with just each other, each busy with their own books.

“Who asked you?” Jin Ling lifted his chin in challenge. Lan SiZhui ignored him.

“Young Master Wei, do you know how to combine a talisman with a spell effectively?” Wei WuXian looked towards Lan WangJi, but seeing the other seemingly not paying them any attention, he turned towards them with a sly grin.

“It’s not just that certain spells with certain talismans can be effective combined, but sometimes even more powerful than just one in itself. Say, you take an Evil Repulsion spell and use it with a Closed Doors talisman, it will create the most powerful evil-proof door.” He paused. “For a while anyways. It only last as long as the talisman itself would.” He paused again. “Well, it depends on the talisman itself. If you take a growing talisman and combine it with a purging spell, if it is executed expertly, it can hold up for a hundred years without you needing to feed spiritual energy into it, since those two do not require it to last in the first place.”

“That’s it!” Lan JingYi exclaimed, looking back at SiZhui. “The entr—The thing, it stayed hidden for so long, because it was made with spells and talismans that didn’t require spiritual energy to be fed into it!”

“So, then how do we uncover it?” Jin Ling asked with a frown.

“That’s easy. Remove the talisman.” Wei WuXian answered.

“If we would see a talisman, don’t you think we’d have done that already?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Use spiritual energy to dispose the spell.” Lan WangJi said. At his voice the four teens turned in his direction, but he was still occupied with his work.

“But we don’t know where it is.” Lan JingYi said.

“If you don’t know where it is, how do you know it’s hidden?” Wei WuXian looked at them skeptically.

“We know where it is, but it’s a big place.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “We won’t go around, sending spiritual energy left and right.”

“Of course not, or else you’d have already found it.” Wei WuXian answered in kind. There was a pause.

“Okay, so, we know how to get rid of the spell that hides it, what about the wards?” JingYi asked.

“I found the spell.” Jin Ling answered arrogantly.

“Young Master Jin, I’m not so sure about it.” Lan SiZhui said, pulling the scroll Jin Ling showed him earlier in front of him. “This Suppressing Ward, while effective against evil spirits, it is not nearly strong enough to hold what we’re looking for.”

“Could it have been combined with something, like the cloaking spell?” Lan JingYi furrowed his brows.

“Wards are as strong as the caster is.” Said Lan WangJi.

“Oh. That’s right.” Lan SiZhui looked down at the ward array. “But it still doesn’t seem strong enough to have lasted for years on its own. Perhaps...”

“What is it?” Lan JingYi encouraged.

“It cannot be strong enough to contain the—the thing we’re looking for. Unless the caster is still there.”

“What?” Jin Ling frowned. “Isn’t the...” He trailed off, looking over at Wei WuXian, who was now shamelessly eavesdropping, not even pretending to write. “Don’t you have punishment to do?” Jin Ling frowned at him. Wei WuXian pouted, but at Lan WangJi’s look, he picked up his brush.

“We’ll talk about that later during dinner at Lan SiZhui’s rooms.” Lan SiZhui nodded at Lan JingYi’s proposal. “Have you found anything?” He asked then nodding towards Lan SiZhui’s own piles of books. He pressed his lips together and shook his head.

“What I’ve found we should discuss in private.”

“So, now the only question left is how do we find the en—the location and dispel the wards.” Lan JingYi leaned back on his hands. “This would be so much easier if we were alive back then.” He frowned.

“Oh, please, you’d have been amongst the first ones to fall in the war.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Like you wouldn’t have!” Lan JingYi glared back.

“I believe you’d have both survived, just because you’d have been too stubborn to die.” Lan SiZhui inserted with a repressed smirk.

“Lan SiZhui!” Jin Ling’s eyes bulged. “Did you just make a joke?!”

“He can joke!” Lan JingYi defended. “Better than you, anyways!”

“You—! I’ll break your legs!” Jin Ling raised his fist with no intention of hitting the other. Lan SiZhui shook his head fondly.

“Keep quiet.” Hanguang-Jun said gently and the two quieted.

“What war are you talking about?” Wei WuXian leaned over with a curious expression.

“It’s none of your business.” Jin Ling turned his nose up. “We should go back to research anyways.” He paused, eyes widening comically. “You! Lan SiZhui, what have you done to me!” Lan SiZhui couldn’t repress his smile this time.

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Lan SiZhui enjoyed the afternoon as much as he ever enjoyed research, but soon their books got a few too few and their enthusiasm had died down. By the time dinner rolled around, all three of them were ready to leave the library. They didn’t so earlier, because going to Lan SiZhui’s rooms in the middle of the day, even though they knew they were having important discussions, to outsiders it might look like they were slacking and lazing around. Going to the lectures seemed like it would just occupy their minds with the class and make them forget finer details, so they stayed.

Once back at Lan SiZhui’s, they discussed their theories.

“Okay, so now we know we’re looking for an entrance hidden by a spell and a talisman, and that the wards are as strong as whoever cast them. So, who cast them?” Lan JingYi asked once they’ve finished with dinner and tea had been served.

“I might know.” Lan SiZhui said. “As I was looking through the history books, I’ve noticed something. I’ve read through Lan Yi’s biography. She was one of the Sect Leaders of the GusuLan Sect, she was notable, because she was one of the only female Sect Leaders ever.” He said for Jin Ling’s sake.

“I think I remember something from my studies.” Jin Ling nodded. Lan SiZhui nodded in confirmation.

“But she lived, like, a hundred years ago.” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “But if you think about it, it makes sense. Whoever hid the Yin Iron shard in the Cloud Recesses had been strong. Very strong.”

“If I lived a hundred of years, I’d be strong enough to hide it as well.” Jin Ling said, for once following Lan SiZhui’s logic beautifully.

“Okay. Why do you think it was her? Based on that, any strong cultivator could do that.”

“Because she was the only one whose name was mentioned along with the back mountains. They say before she died, or supposedly died, she went into seclusion on Xiawu, but nobody ever saw her again, so they assumed she died somewhere in the back mountains. If she had the Yin Iron shard, she has to be the one who took it to the Cold Pond Cave.”

“That’s why they never found her body!” Lan JingYi exclaimed excitedly.

“Precisely.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“So... she hides in the Cold Pond Cave for a hundred years, hides the cave entrance, puts up wards...” Lan JingYi stroked his chin. “But if it stayed hidden for so long, how did Wen RuoHan find it?”

“I’m not sure.” Lan SiZhui looked down.

“It doesn’t matter.” Jin Ling waved a dismissive hand. “If we find it, he won’t. So, what now? How do we find the entrance?”

“I’m starting to think we might need to descend at the drop on the cliff.” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“But we cannot fly our swords there.” Lan JingYi protested. “And even if we could, Jin Ling doesn’t have his. And we still don’t know how to break through the wards.”

Lan SiZhui looked down in thought.

“We should do some more research about breaking wards that’s caster is still alive.” Lan SiZhui proposed.

“I hate agreeing with you.” Jin Ling frowned at him and it brought a smug smile on Lan JingYi’s lips.



So, they did even more research, and for hours went around the mountain to send out spiritual energy in order to find the entrance. Jin Ling tagged along with a sour face, unable to do much without his sword. He took a bow and an arrow with him, and while Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui worked, shot at birds that flew off, without the intention of hitting them. They did this for a week with no avail. Then, as they were descending the mountain, done for the day with the search, they came across a strange group of people.

They recognized Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun right away. But it took them a moment to realize they were conversing with Wei WuXian, Jiang WanYin, Lady Wen and Wen Ning. They halted momentarily, unsure if they should proceed. They shared a confused look, but then started walking again. As they neared them, Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun slowed.

“ZeWu-Jun, Second Young Master Lan, Young Masters, Lady.” The three of them bowed in greeting.

“Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi, Jin Ling.” ZeWu-Jun greeted them with a smile.

“What were you doing in the mountains?” Wei WuXian asked with furrowed brows and crossed his arms.

“We were practicing, obviously.” Jin Ling frowned back at him and gestured at his bow. ZeWu-Jun smiled at them.

“Are you talented with a bow more than with a sword, Young Master Jin?” He asked politely.

“Very much so!” He puffed out his chest. Sensing he was about to let them know he was the second-best archer in Lanling, something that at this time wasn’t true, Lan SiZhui was quick to cut in. He ignored Jin Ling’s hurt look as he asked:

“Are ZeWu-Jun and Second Young Master Lan heading out?”

“We’re going night-hunting!” Wei WuXian answered in their place smugly. Lan SiZhui looked at his seniors surprised. It wasn’t common that anyone would go night-hunting during the Lan Guest Lectures, less so to take guest disciples with them!

“Stop lying!” Jin Ling scoffed. “ZeWu-Jun wouldn’t take guest disciples to night-hunt.”

“We actually are.” ZeWu-Jun inserted, amused. Jin Ling glared at him with wide eyes. There was a pause, then ZeWu-Jun asked: “Would the three of you like to come with us?”

“Really?” Lan JingYi asked, as if he couldn’t believe he was allowed to night-hunt with ZeWu-Jun, despite the senior taking them a couple of times when they were younger.

“Brother.” Lan WangJi’s voice was warning.

“Some of the brothers we would’ve taken with us would’ve missed important work. And it seems like these disciples have time to spare. Wouldn’t it be foolish to let them slack while others give up their time for this?” ZeWu-Jun reasoned. Lan WangJi looked away. “It is decided then, unless the brothers have somewhere else to be.” He raised challenging eyebrows at the three.

“I don’t have a sword.” Jin Ling muttered under his breath so that Lan SiZhui had a hard time making out his words.

“What was that?” Wei WuXian furrowed his brows.

“I don’t have a sword.” Jin Ling looked up angrily.

“Where is it, Young Master Jin?” ZeWu-Jun asked, not unkindly.

“It’s...” Jin Ling looked down in thought for a moment before raising his eyes in challenge. “It got stolen before we arrived, along with my spirit dog. So, now I’m swordless and dogless. I can’t go.” He didn’t outright show how upset he was, but Lan SiZhui could imagine.

“So what?” Lady Wen’s harsh words startled everyone. “My brother doesn’t have a sword either, but he’s still coming.” She said sharply, and Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes. It was

obvious Jin Ling didn't know how to handle her disapproving words either, as his face became as red as her robes and his nostrils flared in responding anger.

"Lady Wen is right." ZeWu-Jun smiled mildly, tone placating. "I'm sure Young Master Jin can be plenty of help with his bow, and if it comes to it, Lan SiZhui or Lan JingYi can help him out with their own swords."

"Fine." Jin Ling huffed after a pause. "I'll go." His tone was as if he was doing them a favor. ZeWu-Jun inclined his head and Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui bowed in gratitude. They set off, together this time, down the mountain. Some brothers were waiting for them at the gates, but with a few words, ZeWu-Jun sent them back to the Cloud Recesses. They decided, since there was more than one person who could not travel by sword, they walked to Caiyi Town. It was a bit more than an hour away on foot, so no one complained.

Wei WuXian was walking behind Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen for a few minutes with Jiang WanYin until he slowed so he could walk by Jin Ling, Lan JingYi, and Lan SiZhui's trio.

"So, Young Master Jin, your sword was stolen?"

"It's none of your business!" Jin Ling snapped, hand tightening on his bow. Wei WuXian pouted.

"Young Master Jin, didn't you go looking for it?"

"No, if you must know, because I know exactly who has it." He set his jaw.

"But if you know, why didn't you take it back?!"

"Because it's Jin ZiXuan, that's why." He huffed.

"Your Young Master stole your sword?" Wei WuXian frowned. Lan JingYi suddenly stepped between them. Lan SiZhui didn't even notice him leave his side.

"He didn't. He said Jin ZiXuan has it, not that he was the one who stole it. Aren't you listening?" Lan JingYi said.

"I'm listening, I'm listening, I just don't understand!" Wei WuXian crossed his arms across his chest. "How can your sword be stolen, but still with Jin ZiXuan, and why don't you have it then?"

"He's teaching Jin Ling a lesson." Lan JingYi exclaimed smartly.

"A lesson?"

"To not leave his things all around the place." Lan JingYi and Jin Ling both ignored that Jin Ling was relatively tidy.

"Really? That's awfully harsh, taking one's sword away, just to teach them a lesson!" Wei WuXian sounded scandalized.

“It’s fine. I don’t need it during the lectures anyways, so it’s just embarrassing at most. Unless suddenly I get roped into a night-hunt somehow.” Jin Ling glared at the back of ZeWu-Jun’s head. Lan SiZhui repressed a smile.

“Hm.” Wei WuXian pouted his lips, looking away in thought. When he looked up again, he changed the topic. “So, what were you guys really doing up on the mountain?” He asked. “I know there is a practice field for archers in the Cloud Recesses.”

“How is that your business?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue. “Can’t you stay out of other people’s business?”

“Not if they’re acting suspicious!” Wei WuXian protested. “And you guys have been acting weird ever since I’ve met you.” There was a pause when no one answered him. “Are you seriously going to be like this?” He pouted.

“Wei WuXian! Who are you bothering now?!” Came a shout from the front of the group in Jiang WanYin’s voice.

“Hey, Jiang Cheng!” Wei WuXian called back rather loudly, the shrill voice making Lan SiZhui flinch. “I’m not bothering anyone! I’m just talking to my friends!”

At that, there was a longer pause and Wei WuXian grinned at them, like they shared a joke. Then Jiang WanYin appeared next to him and took hold of his arm.

“When will you understand they don’t want to be your friends? Now stop being noisy and leave them alone.” He tugged at Wei WuXian’s arm.

“Jiang Cheng, you’re so harsh!” Wei WuXian whined, even as he let himself be pulled back to the front.



They reached Caiyi town and took some time to rest. ZeWu-Jun proposed they find an inn to sit and rest. Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a room and Jin Ling immediately claimed a bed and leaned comfortably back, his bow and quiver leaned against it. Lan JingYi sat on the outer side of the table with a sigh, head popped up on his arm. Lan SiZhui sat on the other side and meditated.

They spent a surprising amount of time there, until they were fetched by a disciple downstairs, where ZeWu-Jun had told them the clan leader they were supposed to be led by for politics’ sake was delayed on an important business and they were spending the night in Caiyi Town. They dined with the other disciples, then everybody returned to their rooms to rest.

The next day they departed after lunch. They went by foot to Biling lake, which was a little more than two hours from Caiyi Town. They’ve been on the road for some time when they heard someone speak up in the front.

“I heard a fisherman died yesterday. I'd like to see how much power these little ghosts have. Usually, Water Ghosts just play tricks on people, now they even dare to eat humans.” There was a pause, then they could clearly make out Wei WuXian's voice:

“ZeWu-Jun, besides the villagers, is there anyone else who has seen these things?”

“The ghosts are so crafty. Once people are dragged into the water, they can barely swim back. No one has ever seen their true appearance.” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows in thought. Wei WuXian was correct, of course. Every Water Ghost he'd ever crossed had been just a general menace, but they have never eaten people.

“Then, ZeWu-Jun...?” Wei WuXian asked something much lower, so they couldn't hear, nor ZeWu-Jun's answer. Then Wei WuXian continued with a slightly clearer voice: “Spiritual energy has been surging in Cloud Recesses recently, and now, there are cultivators' souls being snatched, and there are even Water Ghosts. Do you think they are related?”

Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look. Soul snatch! The puppet! They've forgot about it in the light of their discovery of being in the past.

“Lan SiZhui?” Lan JingYi asked lowly.

“This makes sense.” Lan SiZhui answered in kind. “Fierce corpses are common, but puppets are almost always related to the Yin Iron.”

“Could they be related to the Water Ghosts?” Jin Ling leaned over Lan JingYi to ask.

“I don't think so.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. Biling lake was far from the Cloud Recesses. Even if the Yin Iron's energy was seeping out and turning corpses into puppets, it wouldn't have reached Biling lake.

“ZeWu-Jun is right. We can't waste time.” Came suddenly Jiang WanYin's voice from the front and everyone's pace fastened momentarily.

“...You think so too, don't you?!” They heard Wei WuXian's voice pierce through the forest. There was quiet murmur for a few seconds, then they all halted. Lan JingYi craned his neck to see what was going on in the front, then they needn't to wonder, because Wei WuXian exclaimed: “Lan Zhan, why did you do that? I haven't even tasted a drop! Give it back!” And soon they realized Lan WangJi must've had enough of Wei WuXian swinging his jar of alcohol around him. As they finally started moving again, hearing Wei WuXian complain in the front while the others were slightly behind, Jin Ling turned to Lan SiZhui again.

“Lan SiZhui, why don't you think they're related? It makes sense, doesn't it? The shard controls resentful energy, and these Water Ghosts are also malicious.”

“But the shard needs to be controlled by someone to direct these things.” Lan JingYi argued. “If it truly is with Lan—with the Lady, then she wouldn't use it for such things and the puppet they've brought back had been affected but not controlled by it.”



“Lan JingYi is right.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Without the intent being made clear, it cannot do much. Besides it is behind strong wards, up in the Cloud Recesses. Even if the wards were weakening, it couldn’t have reached this far without having an obvious effect on the Cloud Recesses first – we would’ve surely noticed that.”

“If you say so...” Jin Ling said, and opened his mouth to say something else when Lan JingYi between them suddenly fell forwards, grabbing onto their arms for purchase. While Lan SiZhui could’ve held him up, Jin Ling couldn’t, and he fell with him. Not being able to bear the double-weight, Lan SiZhui fell with them. The three sprayed out on the ground in a pool of white robes and alarmed shouts from both them and the people around them.

“What the...?!” Jin Ling pushed himself up. Lan SiZhui did the same, immediately reaching for Lan JingYi, who was frowning and sporting a scraped chin.

“Brothers, are you all right?!” Came Wei WuXian’s voice from above them as he crouched by them. Looking around, Lan SiZhui noted the Lan and Su brothers who had their swords out, facing away from them to ward off outside danger while Jiang WanYin, Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun were standing above them.

“We were walking too close and Jin Ling stepped on my robes.” Lan JingYi told them, hissing as he touched his chin tenderly. Lan SiZhui first felt relieved, then intensely embarrassed. His face heated.

“If you weren’t whispering about, you’d have paid more attention!” Lady Wen snapped. Swords were sheathed and hands offered to the three fallen boys.

“Were you eavesdropping on us?!” Jin Ling seemed relieved to direct his anger born out of embarrassment onto something else. Lady Wen glared back at him, then with a flick of her robes, turned away. Wen Ning seemed hesitant if he should follow his sister’s example, in the end he followed her.

“What were you whispering about that was so important you tripped?” Wei WuXian frowned at them. Even Hanguang-Jun seemed interested, so did ZeWu-Jun.

“Clearly, it’s a private matter, since we were discussing it quietly!” Jin Ling snapped.

“The three of you have an awful lot to talk about privately.” Wei WuXian crossed his arms, eyes narrowing.

“How is that any of your business?” Jin Ling fumed.

“I just find it interesting,” Wei WuXian started, also raising his voice a little, “that two Lan disciples are such close friends with a Jin disciple. You seem to know each other deeply. Where would you have spent so much time together like that?”

“If you must know, we—” Jin Ling started, but sensing he was about to forget what time they were in, Lan SiZhui stepped forward.

“Young Master Wei.” He bowed in apology. “As you must remember us mentioning earlier, we have some family ties. And Lan JingYi had been my best friend since we were little.” He trailed off, letting Wei WuXian drawing his own conclusions.

“Young Master Wei.” ZeWu-Jun warned and stepped closer before the boy could go on. “Lan SiZhui, if the three of you are alright, we shall proceed.” Lan SiZhui nodded and bowed. Lan JingYi followed his example and Jin Ling reluctantly did so as well. With a final grimace, Wei WuXian turned and followed Lan XiChen towards the lake. Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a glance, then started ahead as well.

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The night-hunt went like this: ZeWu-Jun took Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling to travel on his boat with the Su Clan leader. At this time, Su She was not yet Clan Leader, but his older brother, Su MuShi was. Lan SiZhui remembered from stories related to the Su Clan that Su MuShi died in the Sunshot Campaign, and Su She took his place as Clan Leader and it was him who cut ties with the main Sect.

While Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling flanked ZeWu-Jun, Lan JingYi was instructed to go with the Su and the other Lan disciples. It was probably an attempt to keep temperaments separated.

They neared the haunted area and Wei WuXian kept chattering until suddenly he upturned Lan WangJi’s boat, which took everyone’s attention. On the bottom of it was some kind of creature. The thing, whatever it was, did not look like a water ghost. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a look while the others conversed, then ZeWu-Jun called out:

“Young Master Wei, how did you know they were under the boat?”

“Easy. The movement was strange.” Wei WuXian answered, in his usual ‘this should go without saying’ manner.

“What was strange about it?” Lady Wen called out.

“Just now, his boat had only one person on it, but it sunk deeper than the boat carrying two people. So, there must have been Water Ghosts under it.” The explanation made sense and Lan SiZhui noted to watch out for that if he ever had to deal with water ghosts in the future.

“You’re knowledgeable.” ZeWu-Jun praised before he turned back. Jin Ling’s hand tightened on his bow.

“It’s here!” Someone called out.

“Catch it!”

“Watch the right!”

The shouts came behind them, then Jin Ling moved without a word, pulling out an arrow and shooting at the side of the boat. A creature fell into the water, sliced in half. Another arrow, another creature, then quiet. ZeWu-Jun turned, alarmed at the sound of the bow sting

releasing, then locked eyes with Jin Ling and smiled with a nod. A praise Jin Ling didn't acknowledge. Behind them the shouts ceased and they heard them conversing again.

There were a few minutes of quiet, while they headed into a fog even thicker than before. They couldn't see the other boats anymore. Then there was a pained shout and everyone unsheathed their swords.

"Jiang Cheng, are you okay?!" They heard Wei WuXian call out and ZeWu-Jun took a step towards the back of the boat, as if he wanted to go there himself. Jin Ling also tensed, staring into the fog. There was a long pause when everything was quiet. "Jiang Cheng, where are you?!" Wei WuXian's voice was even more worried.

"I'm fine!" Jiang WanYin finally called out, and ZeWu-Jun took a deep breath, closing his eyes briefly in relief. There was a moment of quiet, then Lan SiZhui noticed something moving to the side of the boat and he sent Yingjiu into the water. It sliced through the ripples without a sound and came back, successfully slicing the creature. They saw two more shadows moving away from their boat. ZeWu-Jun nodded to him approvingly.

Then they heard splashes and a boat being tossed around and ZeWu-Jun's expression turned worried again. Before they could confirm everyone was alright, the water was swarmed by the creatures, turning it dark and murky. It was as if they were rowing in ink instead of water. The boats started rocking and there were shouts of alarm from every direction. Lan SiZhui's hold tightened on Yingjiu.

"Aqua Demon!" Wei WuXian shouted somewhere. Of course. Water ghosts did not eat people, while aqua demons were more savage. Nobody thought about the creature being one, because usually a great disaster had to happen for it to take residence in a lake. It was almost impossible to get rid of it, they either needed to be moved into another body of water or dried out with the lake itself. They had no way of countering it.

"Ride on swords!" Lan WangJi's call was clear as ever. ZeWu-Jun looked at Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui. He looked over at Jin Ling as well, holding out his arm. With a warning look, Jin Ling grasped it, holding on tight as Lan SiZhui took off, Jin Ling closely behind him. They did not see much of the others as the fog was still thick, but then they heard Liebing's song from the side. Lan SiZhui felt Jin Ling tense behind him as the calming melody pierced through the air. As Clarity finished, ZeWu-Jun called out:

"Lan SiZhui, are you close?"

"I'm here." He answered immediately, moving his sword closer, so they could see each other.

"Young Master Jin, Lan SiZhui, help me with a suppressing array."

"Yes, ZeWu-Jun."

Lan SiZhui shifted his weight, so he stood dangerously close to the end of his sword hilt, while Jin Ling moved back towards the tip. It wasn't the textbook formation, but it had to do for now. Yingjiu stayed perfectly balanced. They followed ZeWu-Jun's clues as they made

the array, so they worked in perfect sync. Then the array was formed and ZeWu-Jun sighed, relieved.

“It should hold until we can set up a more permanent arrangement.” He said as if to just himself then turned to Lan SiZhui. “Head back right away, your spiritual energy cannot run out before you reach the shore.” Lan SiZhui nodded and Jin Ling and him moved back to their previous position before riding off. From behind, they heard ZeWu-Jun ask if everyone was alright, and instructing them to head to shore as well.

Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui had landed and waited for them by the time they all arrived. They did a headcount before proceeding. Only Jiang WanYin and Wen Ning got injured during the night-hunt, but nobody was dead, everyone accounted for. Still, ZeWu-Jun was not pleased.

“Let us head back to Caiyi town and take some rest for the night.” He suggested, the sky already darkening. “Lady Wen, does Wen Ning require immediate medical attention?” He asked, forehead wrinkled in worry.

“He just needs to rest. He will be fine by morning.” Lady Wen reassured. ZeWu-Jun seemed skeptical but accepting. He nodded and soon they mounted their swords again. This time it was Lan JingYi who took Jin Ling on his sword, claiming Lan SiZhui had exhausted enough of his spiritual energy for the day. Surprisingly, there was not a word from them on the way back.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Mountains:

黎明 Lí míng: "dawn"

早上 Zǎo shàng: "morning"

正午 Zhèng wǔ: "midday"

下午 Xià wǔ: "afternoon"

晚間 Wǎn jiān: "evening"

午夜 Wǔ yè: "midnight"

Lan SiZhui's sword: 營救 Yíng jiù: "to save/to rescue"

## Responsibility III.

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a room in the inn, while Jin Ling got housed with some other disciples. Before going to bed, they've agreed to meet at breakfast, so they greeted Jin Ling as he entered, just minutes after Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui settled at their table. Not many were awake so early, and even Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun arrived after the three teens had already ordered their breakfast.

The next up was Jiang WanYin, though he didn't eat breakfast in the inn but left. Then the Su disciples woke and soon, ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun's table was surrounded by white-robed figures as they discussed something or another.

The last to leave their rooms had been the Wen siblings and Wei WuXian. ZeWu-Jun immediately went to the Wen disciples to check on them, and soon, it was time for lunch. Wen Ning was perfectly fine, claiming to have lost consciousness due to the aqua demon and he was not injured. Reassured, ZeWu-Jun offered them to take them back to Gusu via boats, and from there the walk back to the Cloud Recesses would be shorter.

The boat ride was... lively. Even if the people of Caiyi were less fascinated by the cultivators, they were still offered little gifts from merchants in hopes their goods would be the ones the renowned cultivators chose to buy. It was annoying and endearing at the same time. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui decided to share a boat and the three of them sat comfortably, taking advantage of their seniors being in the front, their back to them.

Lan JingYi bought some lotus pods and was picking from them, leaning comfortably on one elbow. Frowning and seemingly disgusted, Jin Ling took some from his pile to himself and opened them much quicker than Lan JingYi, probably practice from Lotus Pier, and popped them into his mouth. At some point, he pushed a handful into Lan SiZhui's palm, claiming he didn't like the very white ones. Lan SiZhui repressed a smile as he ate the already peeled seeds.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei WuXian called out at some point and they looked up, seeing him raise his hand. "Have some loquats!" He shouted as he threw one. They watched in wonder as Lan WangJi caught it without looking. Lan JingYi's grin was awestruck.

"No." Lan WangJi called back and without looking, threw the fruit right into Wei WuXian's hand.

"Hanguang-Jun is so cool." Lan JingYi beamed.

"Jiang Cheng! Catch it!" Wei WuXian threw the fruit to his brother, who also caught it. For a moment, it seemed like he was going to refuse, but then started peeling it, and Lan SiZhui felt a fond smile stretch his lips. He wished their relationship would be like that in the future, too.

"Lan SiZhui!" He heard Wei WuXian call, then caught a little yellow fruit that almost hit him in the face. Looking up, he saw Wei WuXian's wide grin aimed at him and he bowed his head in thanks, even if he wasn't feeling like eating, his stomach upset at the boat ride.

“Why don’t I get one?!” Jin Ling exclaimed.

“Do you want one?” Wei WuXian called over.

“Not from you!” Jin Ling snapped, crossing his arms over his chest. Before Lan SiZhui could offer his own, Jin Ling jerked, then there was a loquat in his hand. They looked towards Wei WuXian, who was not looking at them. Another fruit landed in the boat, bouncing off Lan JingYi’s chest. He quickly picked it up.

“Who...?” He looked around, then they saw the end of the motion as ZeWu-Jun lowered his arm. Lan JingYi cupped the fruit like it was a holy artefact.

“Don’t cradle it to your chest like that.” Jin Ling scoffed as he bit into his own fruit, humming appreciatively.

“Shut up.” Lan JingYi muttered as he started carefully peeling. Lan SiZhui smiled at them, hiding his own fruit in his sleeve to eat later.

Slowly, they reached Gusu. Lan SiZhui loved the city, which he called home. Even though the Cloud Recesses were removed, an hour or so away from the biggest city in the area, technically it was considered a part of it. Seeing GusuLan disciples around town was not uncommon. Lan SiZhui spent many days in Gusu in his youth, and still enjoyed coming when he had the time to just visit.

Gusu, just like Caiyi, was built mainly from the white stones of the mountains, greyed with age. Merchants, vendors and private sellers littered the town. One couldn’t find a street in Gusu, nor in Caiyi, where at least one vendor wouldn’t try to sell them something. That being said, there was order to the chaos. At the harbors and docks, mainly fishermen and alcohol makers sold their goods. In the city center, local farmers were selling anything from fruit to homemade brew. On the main street that led to the Cloud Recesses were mainly booksellers and armories. On the side streets, food vendors and textile makers tried to make a living.

Most buildings were inns, tea houses and bigger businesses, those who could afford to open a shop, residential buildings frequented the outer rings and then came farms. All buildings looked identical, with white-painted walls and dark-blue roof tiles.

“Are you seriously refusing so many gifts?” Wei WuXian frowned as he stood in the city center, in front of a stall selling tea, his arms crossed. ZeWu-Jun was conversing with the seller, Hanguang-Jun to the side. Lan SiZhui bought some tea as well, so they were standing in a group.

“Rule two hundred seventy-one, do not accept free reward. Rule two-thousand forty-three, a gift given with ulterior intention shall be refused.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. He was wrong about the second one, it being rule two-thousand forty-five, but Lan SiZhui only listened with half an ear as he watched ZeWu-Jun accepting the little bag of Lanling’s *Red Dawn*. His own portions of Qishan’s *Sunflower*, *Mountain mist*, *Breaking Dawn* and Yunmeng’s *Calm Mind* were being prepared.

In the future, it was almost impossible to find Qishan tea blends. The region was greatly gifted with fertile soil, but since there was no major Sect to handle bigger trading contracts, it was up to the smaller Clans of the area to export. The smaller Clans didn't have interest in trading outside the region, and the outsiders disliked associating with them, so most trading went down between the Qishan Clans. Unless one went on Qishan territory, they would not be able to taste their goods.

Lan SiZhui had been to the region only once, and thanks to his raising in the Lan Sect and Wen Ning's lack of need for humane needs, he seldom indulged in such activities as tasting local specialties. During their stay, he mostly ate small portions of general foods and bland tea. He didn't think he'd get the chance to really discover local flavors, but now that they were in the past, he was excited to discover that he could find such teas in Gusu of all places.

"Lan SiZhui, why are you buying so much tea?" Wei WuXian asked suddenly beside him.

"I've never tried Qishan teas before and *Calm Mind* is for Young Master Jin." He answered truthfully.

"I thought since you were related to the Wen Sect, you've tried their tea before." At that, ZeWu-Jun halted in the process of turning back to his brother. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes.

"Young Master Wei, gossiping is forbidden." Lan JingYi stepped between him and Lan SiZhui after it became evident Lan SiZhui wasn't going to say anything.

"Yes, stop stirring up rumors!" Jin Ling joined.

"It's not a rumor, you said so yourself!" Wei WuXian argued, turning towards Jin Ling. "You said Wen Qing was his cousin. Did you lie then?"

"I..." Jin Ling trailed off, glancing unsurely at Lan SiZhui, who shook his head. Suddenly the excitement upon finding the tea blends was gone. "It's none of your business!" Jin Ling snapped.

"The three of you are so strange." Wei WuXian shook his head as if disappointed.

"Wei WuXian, stop bothering others." Jiang WanYin inserted from where he was standing almost close with Hanguang-Jun.

"But Jiang Cheng, don't you find it weird as well?" He pouted.

"It's none of our business! Leave them alone."

"Your tea." The seller said quietly and Lan SiZhui turned, thanking him with a small smile and paying generously. He hid the teas in his sleeve, then done something he seldom, if ever, did, and walked away without a word.

Eventually Jin Ling and Lan JingYi found him near his favorite shop, the one ZeWu-Jun always took him when they came to Gusu together, because ZeWu-Jun loved the cake there. He didn't go in, it wouldn't have felt right, but it was a place of comfort, of soft conversations and smiles, of laughter and joy.

“I’m gonna break both his legs!” The only reason he knew they were coming, because he heard Jin Ling from so far away on the busy street.

“We’re back to leg breaking then, good. I started missing it.” Lan JingYi sounded like he rolled his eyes.

“Oh? Do you want yours broken too?”

“Young Mistress Jin, Lan SiZhui bought you *Calm Mind* tea. Please make sure you drink it every day.”

“You—! Do you have a death wish?!” Lan SiZhui smiled by the time they reached him. “There you are!” Jin Ling huffed. “We’ve looked for you everywhere!”

“This is the second place we came, the first was the main street.” Lan JingYi inserted with a roll of his eyes.

“Oh, so we went there with a destination in mind, not just got lost?!” Jin Ling glared. The familiarity of their bickering was too much and Lan SiZhui hid his chuckles behind his sleeve.

“Lan SiZhui?” Lan JingYi asked with a worried note. He looked up, smiling brightly at his friends.

“I’m alright. Let’s go back before ZeWu-Jun thinks we’ve left for good.”



Two weeks went by since they’ve fought the aqua demon when whispering started around Cloud Recesses. Lan SiZhui didn’t need to wonder what it was about as soon he overheard some brothers talk about how Wei WuXian broke the rules by drinking alcohol and Lan WangJi catching him red-handed, only to be dragged into drinking with him! They received a rather harsh punishment.

Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui had spent the two weeks in the library, doing more research. At one point, Jin Ling even proposed they look into the Forbidden Room, but Lan SiZhui shut that idea down quickly. Jin Ling’s punishment just ended a few days prior. Lan SiZhui had no intention letting him take even more.

Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian went missing the day after their punishment for drinking. Apparently, they were in the Cold Springs to relieve their sore backs and never returned. Everyone who could be spared had been sent out to look for them. It took a day’s time to find them.

It was late afternoon when Lan SiZhui felt it. He’d been so attuned to the wards, trying to break them for weeks, almost a month now, that the moment they dispelled, he halted, stumbling at the feeling. Jin Ling and Lan JingYi didn’t notice until they sensed Lan SiZhui wasn’t following them around the mountain path. When they learned what happened, they were confused.



What could've happened to the Yin Iron, to Lan Yi?

Then Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had been found and everyone let out a collective sigh of relief, except the three teens, who were too occupied with the wards. After being called back and accounted for, they returned to the mountains.

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about the wards anymore. The entrance should be easier to find now." Lan JingYi said as they walked around the bottom of a cliff to a path that led to the Floating Lakes.

"We still need to find it though." Jin Ling argued. They turned a corner. It was almost like they were walking by a stone wall, the cliff mercilessly dropping almost vertically. That was where Lan SiZhui felt the tickle of a spell.

"Wait." He said quietly and the three of them halted. He closed his eyes, letting his spiritual energy flow freely in his body to be more sensitive and started walking, feeling out the spell. The others must've sensed it as well, because they quietly followed.

"Here." Lan JingYi said suddenly and the three of them turned towards the stone wall. They examined it for a moment, then Lan JingYi stepped forward, extending his hand, feeling the stone, then... Then disappeared right in front of their eyes!

"Lan JingYi!" Jin Ling and SiZhui called out alarmed, taking a step forward. There was a pause, then Lan JingYi's head appeared... in the stone wall!

"I found it!" He beamed, his grin so wide it split his face in half. "This has to be it! Come on, come now!" He disappeared again. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a look, then Jin Ling rushed forward, touching the stone where Lan JingYi had disappeared. Nothing happened. He pushed at the stone, but still nothing.

"Lan JingYi!" He called out alarmed. Lan SiZhui stepped closer, worried. Lan JingYi's face appeared again.

"Why aren't you coming?" He asked.

"Come out, before it closes again!" Jin Ling called.

"What are you talking about? It wasn't closed. I've been standing here, watching you the whole time."

"The Cold Pond Cave is warded against anyone who is not a Lan." Lan SiZhui said in realization.

"I..." Jin Ling furrowed his brows, then huffed, annoyed. "Great. So, I'm on guard duty." He crossed his arms across his chest, his bow clutched tightly in it.

"At least we know someone will look out for us. Come on, Lan SiZhui." Lan JingYi gestured and disappeared again. Lan SiZhui sent an apologetic smile towards Jin Ling, then touched the stone... except he didn't feel stone but air. He stepped forward, into it, then found himself in a cave, with Lan JingYi slightly ahead, looking around.

“Wait.” Lan SiZhui said suddenly. Lan JingYi turned back, alarmed. “If the place only lets Lan disciples through, how come I could enter?”

“Lan SiZhui, Lan is literally in your name.” Lan JingYi looked at him like he lost his mind.

“My adopted name, yes. But I’m not born into this Sect.”

“Oh, that’s true I guess.” Lan JingYi looked down. Lan SiZhui fell in thought.

“If I could enter, it cannot be that there’s something about our body that allows us access. What do we have that Jin Ling doesn’t?”

“Our robes, swords, forehead ribbons, good nature...” Lan SiZhui ignored the last jab.

“Come on.” He stepped back out and Jin Ling startled as the two of them appeared.

“Well? What have you found? Do you have it?” He asked, glaring at them.

“We haven’t proceeded past the entrance. Young Master Jin, since I could pass the entrance, it cannot be a ward against the body of someone who isn’t a Lan.” Jin Ling blinked at him, then his eyes widened.

“That’s right! You were born a Wen, but you could still enter the Lan’s sanctuary.” Lan SiZhui nodded and looking down at himself, he held out his sword.

“Hold Yingjiu and let’s see if you can pass the wards with it in your hand.” Jin Ling took the sword and turned back to the wall. He touched it. Nothing happened. He turned back, holding out the sword with a shake of his head.

“Here.” Lan JingYi quickly discarded his outer robe and passed it over. Jin Ling looked at it skeptically. “The robes are embroidered with Lan protective talismans.” Lan JingYi explained. Jin Ling frowned down at it, but clutching it in his hand, he touched the stone. Nothing.

“That leaves...” Jin Ling eyed Lan SiZhui’s forehead ribbon. The two Lan swallowed thickly, sharing a look. “What?” he asked with a frown. “You cannot be like that. It doesn’t mean anything, it’s just due to circumstances we need to share it!”

“Ah!” Lan JingYi suddenly exclaimed after a pause. “The forehead ribbon cannot be touched by strangers, only family and spouse. Since Wei WuXian is your maternal uncle, and your adoptive father, you’re family by association. This does not count as a stranger touching it.” He said. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared an uneasy look. Then Lan SiZhui smiled.

He supposed, if he had to call someone from another Sect family, he could do much worse than Jin Ling. The younger boy seemed taken aback by the smile, then even more shocked as Lan SiZhui untied his forehead ribbon. His eyes widened comically as he stared at the place where his forehead ribbon had been. Wordlessly, Lan SiZhui stepped closer and offered one end to Jin Ling. He pressed his lips together and hesitantly took it. He tied it around his hand and Lan SiZhui done the same. Together, they turned to Lan JingYi, whose eyes widened while looking at them.

“Lan SiZhui, I think we’ve spent a lot of time in the mountain.” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows at the strange observation. Lan JingYi nodded towards his forehead. “You have a tan line from your forehead ribbon.”

Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure if he should be offended, amused, or just confused. He lifted a hand and touched his forehead. Next to him, Jin Ling tried to hold back his laugh, but it found its way past his lips in an unattractive snort. Then him and Lan JingYi were howling with laughter and Lan SiZhui’s small chuckles were hid behind his sleeve.

“Alright. Let’s go.” He said once they’ve calmed down. Jin Ling passed the barrier without a problem this time.

It was wet inside the cave. There weren’t many junctions in the tunnel, so they found the main chamber, or what they assumed was it, relatively easily. In the middle of it was a large pond. Not far from where they stood was a platform, almost like a table, and on top of it was a pure white guqin. Lan SiZhui had never seen something like it, and haven’t felt either. It emitted such a strong protective spiritual energy; he was worried for a moment they wouldn’t be able to near it. Everything was frosty, but the lake, surprisingly, was not frozen.

Jin Ling trembled beside Lan SiZhui, rubbing his arms through his robes. The Lan disciples being used to the cold due to living on top of a mountain, did not feel the cold as much.

“Where could it be?” Lan JingYi asked as they took in the chamber.

“If I had to guess, at the important-looking guqin.” Jin Ling stuttered out between clattering teeth.

They shared a look and carefully went around the shore. The guqin’s platform was frozen rock as well, but the guqin was not even frosty.

“Maybe we need to play it to call it forth.” Lan JingYi suggested. Lan SiZhui thought for a moment, then tugged Jin Ling forward. He sat at the guqin, taking deep breaths as he thought. Then he placed his hands on the cold strings and played.

It was unearthly. If he had to explain the feeling, he wouldn’t have been able to, it was so peculiar. Strength and spiritual energy hummed in the guqin such as he’d never felt before. It felt like a forbidden privilege to touch the strings.

He started with a spell to reveal hidden things. When it didn’t work, he tried *Inquiry*, but no one answered. He soothed his hands over the trembling strings and thought.

“Try ‘*Summoning*’.” Jin Ling suggested. There was a pause and the two Lan disciples looked at him. “What? It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Lan SiZhui nodded and cleared his mind, plucking the strings carefully. He called first for Lan Yi, then for the Yin Iron, even though it wasn’t a person. Nothing happened.

“Maybe playing it was not what we needed to do.” Lan JingYi pouted.

“Let’s take a look around.” Lan SiZhui suggested, and together, they walked around the cave. Lan JingYi even went into the water, feeling the bottom with his legs. After what felt like hours, they haven’t found anything.

“I don’t think it’s here anymore.” Lan SiZhui said.

“W-Where else c-can it be?” Jin Ling asked, violent shivers wrecking his frame.

“Maybe it was never here in the first place. It was a long shot anyways.” Lan JingYi said, disappointed. “I mean, Lan Yi lived a hundred years ago. How could she stay alive and hide such a strong artefact in a freezing cold cave?”

“Let’s go then.” Lan SiZhui sighed. They headed out of the mountain just to find themselves in the dark. It was late night, the moon bright above them.

“I-I d-didn’t think w-we spent so m-much time in there!” Jin Ling groaned as Lan SiZhui tied his forehead ribbon in place. In the cold night air, he, too, shivered.

“If we get caught, we’re surely going to be thrown out.” Lan JingYi groaned.

“Sect Leader Jin...”

“D-didn’t you just share y-your important forehead r-ribbon with me? C-call me b-by my name!” Jin Ling snapped irritably as they headed down the path.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui smiled. “Do you know how to make warming talismans?”

“Yes.”

“Make sure to wear one for tonight. Hopefully your Golden Core had kept illness away, but it’s best if you do not risk it.”

“You g-guys weren’t cold?” Jin Ling frowned at them.

“Please, once I took a swim in a frozen lake.” Lan JingYi snorted. “I was challenged by a brother to catch a fish, but I didn’t find any. I was in there for twenty minutes!” He told Lan SiZhui, like he was supposed to be impressed by his stupidity. “And anyways,” Lan JingYi turned back to Jin Ling, “winter in the Cloud Recesses is really harsh. We’re used to such weather.”

“G-good for you.” Jin Ling grumbled under his breath. They descended the mountain quietly, then sneaked into the Cloud Recesses. They haven’t come across any night guards, so they returned to their rooms without getting caught.

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“I think we should leave.” Jin Ling said a few days later as they were having lunch in the back hills. There were no rules – or not yet – that prevented them from taking their lunch wherever they wanted, and it being summer and Jin Ling still not feeling warm after the Cold Pond Cave, he asked if they could have lunch in the sun. Lan JingYi was his partner in the

idea and took them to the fields hidden not far from the Cloud Recesses, where apple trees grew, a rare fogless spot in the mountains.

“And go where?” Lan JingYi asked, mouth full of noodles.

“To find the other shards.” He said. “Obviously, the one here is gone. We do not need to wait around until the lectures are over to leave.”

“Wouldn’t it be suspicious if one day we just left?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“It would be worse if Wen RuoHan found the pieces before us. Look, we know of two shards, but the other’s location is still a mystery. I say we go find the other we know of and with that, we might be able to find the other pieces.”

“That’s sound logic, but where is the second one we know so well?” Lan JingYi frowned skeptically.

“The Burial Mounds.” Jin Ling stated confidently.

“What?!” Lan JingYi’s head snapped to glare at Jin Ling. “You want to go back there?!”

“The Stygian Tiger Amulet was created by the YiLing Patriarch in the Burial Mounds. It is logical that the shard would be there.”

“But remember, this Burial Mounds are not the same as in the future.” Lan JingYi said. “I’ve heard it is a place filled with such fierce resentful energy, nobody survived entering before. Thousands of cultivators had attempted to purge it, but none of them succeeded.”

“How did the YiLing Patriarch live there for so long then?” Jin Ling frowned.

“Don’t ask me, it was him who lived there with him.” Lan JingYi nodded towards Lan SiZhui.

“I don’t remember much of that time.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “When Hanguang-Jun found me, I had a high fever. I forgot almost everything from before.”

There was a pause. “Well, then it’s decided. We won’t go to the Burial Mounds.” Lan JingYi said.

“You’re afraid of resentful energy even after night-hunting with Wei WuXian?” Jin Ling mocked.

“Night-hunting with the YiLing Patriarch is much different than facing uncontrolled resentful energy on our own.” Lan JingYi said, rolling his eyes. “Nobody survived that trip before, as of now. Why would we be the ones who do?”

“There has to be a way.” Jin Ling argued. “Wei WuXian couldn’t have survived just because he was crafty. Are you sure you don’t remember?” He frowned at Lan SiZhui.

“Some things, flashes remain, but not specifics.” He shook his head sadly. Then something came to his mind, upon Jin Ling mentioning night-hunting with Wei WuXian and memories... Oh.

“That’s your ‘I figured something out’ expression.” Lan JingYi said expectantly.

“Is it true?” Jin Ling leaned forward. “You remember something?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. It wouldn’t work anyways. It would be too dangerous. He smiled at them tightly. “Forget it.” He shook his head.

“Come on!” Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. “If you know how to get in, then share with us at last!” He demanded. It was strange, after spending almost two months in the past, away from his responsibilities, Jin Ling started to calm down. At times, his jabs weren’t even serious anymore. To hear that arrogant tone again made Lan SiZhui blink at him.

“*Empathy*.”

“I’m empathetic towards you, I’m not trying to be mean!” Jin Ling snapped. “But if you know something...”

“No, I mean we could perform *Empathy*.” He cleared up. That gave the other two a pause.

“On... whom?” Lan JingYi asked skeptically.

“Me.” Lan SiZhui answered seriously.

“What?!” Jin Ling glared at him. “Why would we do that?!”

“To see into my memories. Even though I don’t remember, it is not due to my mind being damaged. The fact that certain things had come back from that time is a testament to that. Something must’ve remained in my mind, I’m just unable to access it. *Empathy* does not hide these memories from the one entering my mind.”

“It’s dangerous.” Lan JingYi shook his head. “Especially with us. I don’t mean offense, but none of us are experienced in it beyond watching Wei WuXian perform it that one time. It is a technique unique to the Jiang Sect and even they don’t practice it much.”

“That’s why I said forget it.” Lan SiZhui nodded. All three of them were disappointed, but they let the matter go. They finished their lunch and sat around for a little while, enjoying the rare moment of soaking in the sun. In the misty mountains it was not often the sky was so clearly visible. Jin Ling lied on his back as he bathed in the warmth. Lan SiZhui was sitting in lotus position while Lan JingYi leaned on his arms extended behind him.

“Let’s ask uncle.” Jin Ling’s words were so unexpected, they had to ask him to repeat it. “Let’s ask uncle to teach us *Empathy*.”

“And why would he agree?” Lan JingYi raised skeptical eyebrows. “He doesn’t like us at all, and even if he did, he’s still only sixteen, remember?”

“Then Wei WuXian.”

“I’d love to see that conversation.” Lan JingYi snorted, amused at the idea. Jin Ling sat up.

“I’m serious. We need to find the shards to end the war before it begins. We only know of one’s location and the others we have no way to find unless we have something to lead us there.”

“Didn’t you just hear what we’ve discussed? *Empathy* is dangerous, even for someone experienced as Wei WuXian. And we can hardly ask anyone else to perform it on SiZhui. They’d find things they shouldn’t see.”

“What if we ask ZeWu-Jun?” Lan SiZhui suddenly spoke up. He earned two glares. “When we had just arrived, I had a conversation with him. I asked him if he could go back in time and change the past, would he do it? He said no.” He paused.

“You asked him what?!” Jin Ling exclaimed.

“Young Master Jin, don’t worry! There’s no way he figured us out. It’s almost been a month. Surely, he would’ve mentioned it if he did.”

“That’s how he found the *Collection of Time*, that’s why he took it away?!” Lan JingYi glared at him. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes.

“I asked him about that as well.”

“Great, you gave him all the clues we’ve worked out the truth from. Surely, there’s no way he’d figure it out!” Jin Ling shouted, then groaned loudly, an expression of frustration.

“I’m sorry.” Lan SiZhui bowed his head.

“If we go to him now and he sees your memories, he’ll know for sure.” There was a pause when nobody knew what to say at Jin Ling’s words. In the end, Lan JingYi looked up.

“I mean, if he already knows... what harm could it mean if we just confirmed it? He hadn’t done anything yet.”

“And you don’t think, knowing what will happen, he will try to stop it from happening?” Jin Ling snapped.

“But isn’t that our goal?” Lan JingYi looked over at him sharply. “If ZeWu-Jun helped us, our chances of stopping the war would just rise.”

“No.” Lan SiZhui glared at his friend. “No, Lan JingYi, us trying to change the past is one thing. We meddle with it enough as it is. If ZeWu-Jun finds out, that’s like killing Wen RuoHan and Jin GuangYao this instant.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Lan JingYi shrugged. “All the quicker.”

“Lan JingYi!” Lan SiZhui rarely raised his voice. He didn’t even remember if he ever did. The shout felt foreign in his throat. “We will not tell ZeWu-Jun anything! You’re right. It was my mistake to go to him and ask about this, and I see it now. But he hasn’t figured it out and he cannot ever.” Lan JingYi seemed completely shocked, face pale, eyes wide, mouth wide agape. Lan SiZhui stood, shaking. “I’m going to meditate.” He said, swallowing thickly. “We will talk more about this tomorrow.” He turned and left without parting words.



Lan SiZhui didn’t notice when someone joined him in the Cold Spring. He went there to meditate, to calm his soul. He didn’t expect to meet anyone, and as he slowly emerged from his deep state, he was startled to notice someone not far from him. His jerk at the fright drew the other’s attention on him.

It was Hanguang-Jun.

Lan SiZhui had been very careful not to let himself be alone with his future adoptive father much. It hurt on a much deeper level than seeing everyone else gone to know Hanguang-Jun didn’t remember him. He lowered his eyes at the other’s look and headed towards his clothes.

“You can stay, Lan SiZhui.” Hanguang-Jun said softly before he was halfway there.

“It’s alright, Second Young Master Lan.” Lan SiZhui said after a pause. “I’m sure Second Young Master Lan came here to get away from company as well.” He pulled his inner robes out of the pile. There was a long pause behind him, then Hanguang-Jun asked softly:

“Who are you?”

“Second Young Master Lan?” Lan SiZhui turned back to him, confused as he held his forehead ribbon, about to tie it.

“Who are you really, Wen Yuan?” At the name, he flinched.

“Please, don’t call me that, Second Young Master Lan.” He paused, contemplating if he should say anything. Hanguang-Jun made the decision easier for him by talking, which was rare in itself. It was a testament of how much Lan WangJi didn’t trust him to assume his thoughts.

“You are related to Wen Qing and Jin Ling as well. Your birth parents are dead, and you had two adoptive fathers in your life. Even if I didn’t know there was never a disciple in the Lan Sect with such a history, I’d still be suspicious of you.” So, in the end, it would be Hanguang-Jun who would uncover their secret?

“I lost my parents when I was still a baby.” He said quietly. “A kind man rescued me and my family, and took us, me, in. Then he died and I got sick. I had such a high fever, I forgot who I was, and forgot the kind man. A Lan disciple found me and raised me as his own. It’s only been a few months since I’ve learned that the kind man had been Jin Ling’s uncle, and that I was a Wen before the Lan Sect took me in and raised me as their own.”



“You didn’t know until recently?” Hanguang-Jun asked. Lan SiZhui shook his head. “What are you looking for with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi?”

“The past.” He answered truthfully.

“Your past is hidden behind Wards and Cloaking spells?” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer. Hanguang-Jun paused. “Why don’t you take your birth name back?”

“Second Young Master Lan, the truth is, the Wen name is not fortunate in this time. Besides, my adoptive father gave me my name and throwing it away would dishonor all that he’d done for me. I didn’t know my birth family, I do not have the connection with them as I have with the Lan Sect. I do not wish to return to the Wen Sect, just because by blood I am one.”

Hanguang-Jun didn’t pry more, so Lan SiZhui dressed, bowed to him deeply and left the Cold Spring.



“I still think we should perform *Empathy*.” Jin Ling said as they met in the morning. “Or we could at least try.”

“Young—Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui sighed. “It was a bad idea from the start. I just remembered Wei WuXian doing so and it came to mind.”

“What other choice do we have?” Jin Ling huffed. “We can’t just go there if we don’t know how to survive.”

“Something occurred to me at night.” Lan JingYi said with furrowed brows. “What Jin Ling said a few weeks ago and what I’ve observed months ago. If Su She controlled the puppets without using the Yin Iron, and Wei WuXian controlled the Ghost General on Dafan Mountain, then there must be a way to cultivate demonic energy other than using the Yin Iron.”

“As I mentioned earlier, there is sound logic behind demonic cultivation.” Lan SiZhui said. “The problem with it is that it is too powerful to wield. Those who try without using the Yin Iron die within years. Resentful energy harms the body and the mind.”

“But Su She survived for more than thirteen years.”

“Maybe it’s the flute.” Jin Ling sighed. The other two looked at him questioningly. “Wei WuXian said he heard a second flute both times Su She supposedly took control of his puppets. Maybe the key is the flute. I don’t know. Your Sect is the one that experts in musical cultivation.” He shrugged.

“It is curious, but I think more practical. The flute is easier to carry than other instruments, so having it during battle would be wise, while the guqin is bulky and mostly stationary.” Lan SiZhui said. This also brought up a curious topic Jin Ling mentioned earlier, as to how Su She actually took control of Wei WuXian’s puppets, but that was not what they were supposed to figure out, so Lan SiZhui stored that question for later analysis.

“That’s true...” Jin Ling sighed. “I’m truly out of ideas then.”

“If we cannot use *Empathy*, then let’s try to think as the YiLing Patriarch did back then.” Lan JingYi suggested. Lan SiZhui nodded encouragingly for him to continue. “Okay.” Lan JingYi sat down on a set of stairs in front of some main buildings. Jin Ling leaned against a pole while Lan SiZhui stood in front of them. “So, there’s a place filled with resentful energy. We’re trying to get in and not get affected by it. What do we do?”

“Use Evil Suppressing talismans to ward them off.”

“They burn through them too quickly.” Lan SiZhui shook his head at Jin Ling’s idea.

“So, we need to make them more powerful.” Lan JingYi said.

“Combine it with a spell?” Jin Ling suggested. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“We’d need to experiment before we could successfully use them.”

“What spell do we combine it with?” Lan JingYi asked.

“A Ward.” Jin Ling looked up. “Like what the Lady did, just the reverse of it.”

“Do you know such wards?” Lan JingYi peered up at him skeptically.

“I’ve studied wards in the past weeks.” Jin Ling nodded. “I’m sure there is one like it.”

“The second issue is that the Burial Mounds are warded as well.” Lan SiZhui said. “The cultivators who tried to purge it put up barriers to stop anyone wandering in. I am not sure how to get past them.”

“We cannot destroy them, because then we’d let the resentful energy out.” Lan JingYi said.

“Can we reuse them?” Jin Ling asked, turning to Lan SiZhui, who shook his head.

“Disable it temporarily to get in.” Lan JingYi snapped his fingers. Jin Ling snorted.

“Again, how? We’re not nearly as powerful as hundreds of cultivators who put up the array.”

“We don’t need to disable it.” Lan SiZhui suddenly said with a realization. “We don’t even need to worry about the array. The wards only reach so high, common cultivators would not fly too high, and when they’d run in the barrier, they’d go around it. But we want to get in purposefully. We fly above and in.”

“We can do that?” Lan JingYi shared a skeptical look with Jin Ling. “That simple?”

“That simple.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Jin Ling pushed himself off the pole.

“Then what are we waiting for?” He asked. “We can leave today even.”

“Sect—Jin Ling, don’t be impatient. We need to make some powerful talismans first.”

“Even more research?” Jin Ling groaned, annoyed.

“At least we can have fun with it.” Lan JingYi smirked.

“Wait.” Jin Ling halted on their way to the library. “What are we going to test it on?” That made Lan SiZhui think as well, then something occurred to him.

“I have an idea.” He said.

“I won’t like it, will I?” Lan JingYi asked, his face betraying his thoughts were on the same track as Lan SiZhui’s.



“Invented? So that’s why you three haven’t attended to the lectures in the past month? Especially you, Jin Ling, you came here to learn!”

“Grandmaster Lan.” Lan JingYi stepped forward. “We’ve been studying hard on our own. Han—Second Young Master Lan can testify to that. I think what we’ve made could really benefit the Sect, all we need is to test it on something truly resentful.”

Grandmaster Lan leaned back, watching them squirm under his scrutinizing gaze. Neither Jin Ling nor Lan JingYi were enthusiastic at Lan SiZhui’s suggestion that they ask for permission from the Grandmaster to use the Mingshi and summon a ghost to test their new talisman. Still, this was their best choice unless they wanted to test it on the field, which made Lan SiZhui incredibly anxious.

“I do not support the students messing with these kinds of things.” The Grandmaster said. It didn’t sound like a rejection, but the three of them lowered their eyes. “But I appreciate you coming to me before doing something foolish like breaking into the Mingshi or doing this during a night-hunt, so I will allow it this once. I want to see all your research on this.” He raised the draft Lan JingYi presented him. “As well as a full report on what you expect this to do. If I approve of it, then, and only then can you test it, under my supervision only.”

“Thank you, Grandmaster Lan!” They bowed enthusiastically.

“Dismissed!” And they filed out of the Lanshi, already planning.

“I’ll write the report on the effects. I think I understand the talisman well.” Lan JingYi said and Lan SiZhui agreed.

“Jin Ling and I will gather the research.”

They spent the next day collecting research while Lan JingYi sat next to them, writing considerably. When they were finished, they were confident in their case. They passed the whole report with the collected research titles and sections of different books and scrolls to Grandmaster. It took him three days to review it, then he summoned them to the Lanshi. Entering, they were faced with not only Grandmaster Lan, but ZeWu-Jun as well, who smiled at them as they bowed.

“Grandmaster Lan, ZeWu-Jun.” They greeted.

“I have reviewed your case.” Grandmaster started without pleasantries. “I have found your argument strong enough to be of interest. I’d like to press, again, this is a one time only opportunity. If this fails, I do not want the three of you to mess around with this kind of craft anymore.”

“And if it succeeds?” Lan JingYi asked, blinking at him curiously.

“Then this will be a one of a kind talisman.” He said with finality in his tone.

“Okay.” Lan JingYi pulled his mouth.

“I have noticed Grandmaster Lan preoccupied with your work when I came by earlier and wanted to see for myself.” ZeWu-Jun said, breaking the tension. “May I ask how the idea came to you?”

The three of them shared a look. “Well, after the aqua demon, we thought it was strange there was no immediate defense against creatures like that, and without the Lan musical cultivation technique, we might not have been able to subdue the beast.” Jin Ling said, the only of the three of them who wasn’t bound by rules not to lie. “We wondered if there might be a way to keep resentful energy and evil spirits and the kind away from our persons for a prolonged period of time, since creatures like that burn through the evil suppressing talismans too quickly. Earlier, we heard Wei WuXian talk about combining talismans with spells, that’s where the idea came from.”

“I see.” ZeWu-Jun seemed pleased. “That’s very considerate of you.”

“Hopefully, it will be effective as well. If it is, then disciples could use it on their night-hunts and be safer.” Lan JingYi said.

“We will test it today after the lectures. If your busy schedules let you, attend to them this time.” Grandmaster Lan looked at them strictly and they bowed. “Dismissed!”

“Thank you, Grandmaster Lan!” They chorused.

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“The talisman, if applied to a person, should keep resentful energy away from their body and mind. With this tool one could walk through Hell and come back unscratched. If applied to a resentful creature, such as a water ghost, a resentful ghost, or a demon, it should subdue the creature, rendering them motionless.”

Grandmaster Lan lowered the paper he’d been reading from.

“If these predictions are correct, we will start the testing on a resentful ghost. Lan SiZhui will be the summoner. Lan XiChen and myself will supervise.” The elders on the balconies sat. There were three of them, while Lan QiRen sat at the main guqin table, the disciples at the subordinate tables. ZeWu-Jun stood behind the Grandmaster while Jin Ling at the door. At

his mark, Lan JingYi stepped back from the summoning circle in the middle of the Mingshi and prepared his talismans. At Grandmaster's nod, Lan SiZhui started the summoning.

It was a low-level resentful ghost. It materialized confidently from Lan SiZhui's play. As soon as the notes faded, Lan QiRen nodded to Lan JingYi, who activated the first talisman. As soon as it made contact with the ghost, it burned with the ghost itself. The three teens' eyes widened. Lan QiRen tilted his head curiously.

"Is the ghost still present?" ZeWu-Jun asked, looking towards Lan SiZhui, who looked down, then played a few questions from *Inquiry*. All of them went unanswered. He shook his head at Lan XiChen. "It seems like the talisman purged a low-level resentful ghost." The scribe noted it where he sat at the very back of the room, protected by strong wards.

"Let's summon something stronger." Grandmaster suggested. Lan SiZhui did so, calling for a slightly more violent ghost. As soon as it was summoned, it snarled and lashed out at them. Lan JingYi activated the talisman. It contacted the ghost. There was a pause, then the ghost sank on its knees. It stayed there for two minutes, then opened its mouth and burned with the talisman. Lan QiRen nodded.

"I'd say your predictions of the grade of the talisman might've been a bit low. Let's note that I estimate it to be a high-level talisman, but we shall proceed to a more powerful ghost to see."

The scribe scribed and Lan SiZhui was given permission for a more serious ghost. It appeared in a cloud of resentful energy. At the activation of the talisman it screamed, falling on its knees. It fought for nearly ten minutes until it burned as well, but Lan SiZhui, not wanting to take chances confirmed with *Inquiry* it was gone.

"Good. I do not allow demons or yao to be summoned. Instead I'd like to test the talisman on a living thing first."

"I volunteer." Lan JingYi stepped forward. Lan QiRen nodded.

"It will be the lowest level of resentful ghost we can summon. We will go up two levels if the talisman proves effective, then we will draw our conclusions from what we observe without risking harm on the cultivator. Who will be the caster?" Of course, they already decided all these, so it came as no surprise that Jin Ling stepped forward. Originally, he wanted to be the one they tested the talisman on, but Lan QiRen went red in the face, lecturing him that he was a guest disciple here and he would not be such a fool to let him volunteer.

Jin Ling took Lan JingYi's place in the protective array and applied a talisman onto him. They shared two quiet words that, from where Lan SiZhui sat sounded suspiciously like:

*"You're an idiot."*

*"You too."*

Then Lan JingYi stepped into the summoning circle. Him and Lan SiZhui shared a look before Lan SiZhui summoned the first ghost. As soon as the talisman activated on Lan

JingYi's chest, it burned off, taking the ghost with it. Lan JingYi looked down in surprise.

"Is there something wrong?" ZeWu-Jun asked in alarm.

"It was not supposed to burn this time." Lan JingYi said, pressing his lips together, frustrated.

"The talisman activated with the ghost's appearance. We've planned to activate it before stepping into—before going somewhere haunted." Jin Ling said. "What if this time you activate it before?"

"Grandmaster?" Lan SiZhui looked over at Lan QiRen, who nodded.

"Another low-level ghost." This time, Lan JingYi activated the talisman before Lan SiZhui started to play. This time, the talisman held longer, but burned eventually too.

"I don't understand." Lan JingYi frowned at his chest. Something occurred to Lan SiZhui as he watched it as well.

"JingYi, your robes." He said. Everyone looked over at him. "The Lan protective embroidery is interfering with the talisman."

"Ah, that's right!" He brightened. "The talismans on the robes are the base of this one. So, if we alter them, then we can use this talisman without needing to carry them with us, and it would mean constant protection like this." He gestured where the ghost burned earlier.

"Don't run off weaving just yet. Shred your cloths and test the theory first." Lan QiRen suggested. Lan JingYi quickly disrobed, then folded them and put them outside the summoning array. Another talisman was applied to his chest, and another low-level ghost was summoned.

This time, the talisman stayed, with the ghost burning out after a minute of being near Lan JingYi. The next ghost could withhold for five minutes before burning down. The third got ten minutes, and cowered as far from Lan JingYi as possible, all the while snarling and reaching for him, only to pull back with a pained cry. Then it burned as well. Lan JingYi stepped out of the summoning circle. As soon as he did so, the talisman on his chest burned off. The three shared a look, then Lan JingYi shrugged a shoulder. They looked towards Grandmaster, waiting for his verdict.

Grandmaster took his time, considering what he saw carefully.

"Disciples. It seems like for the first time in Lan Sect history you've created an effective talisman that could ward off up to high-midgrade resentful ghosts, if not higher level. The usage of the talisman shall be tested by senior disciples before getting integrated into Lan teachings." He took a pause and looked over the three of them carefully. "My last question to you is what do you intend on naming it."

"Grandmaster, if I may." Lan JingYi spoke up, even though they've not discussed names. It seemed like Lan JingYi had something in his mind, and Lan SiZhui was only slightly worried. Neither him nor Jin Ling were great with names, one naming his sword

Grasshopper, the other naming his dog Fairy. Grandmaster nodded to him. Lan JingYi turned to his friends. "I'd like to call it the Graveyard-Purging talisman."

Oh, it wasn't that bad after all. Lan SiZhui nodded his consent with a smile, and Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but then nodded as well. Lan JingYi beamed and turned back to the Grandmaster, who nodded to them.

"Lan JingYi, may I ask why?" ZeWu-Jun asked kindly, only curious.

"Well, I predict if applied correctly, it would be powerful enough to purge a smaller graveyard worth of resentful energy." He said with a shrug.

"That is a bold assumption, but not unreasonable." Lan QiRen said. There was a pause when Lan JingYi was allowed to bask in the praise, then Grandmaster turned to the disciples at the subordinate's table. "Disciples, let us play *Cleansing* before leaving for the day, then you are dismissed." Which meant Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and ZeWu-Jun, along with the elders and the scribe, bowed to him and left the Mingshi. Lan SiZhui stayed and helped clean up.



During the guest lectures, it wasn't often that the Lan Sect left for night-hunts, so it wasn't surprising that by the time Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were ready to leave, the new talisman still hasn't been tested by the seniors at all. It meant they'd not have it embroidered into their cloths by the time Lan JingYi suggested they leave the Cloud Recesses to search the Burial Mounds.

"Is it wise to leave before the talisman had been tested?" Lan SiZhui asked anxiously as they discussed leaving in his rooms at dinner. "Grandmaster Lan might get the wrong idea and think we want to test it on our own."

"Which is actually the right idea." Jin Ling said as he popped an almond in his mouth.

"We can come up with a reason other than that." Lan JingYi said.

"That would be lying."

"Why, what did you plan on saying?" Jin Ling looked at him flatly. "We're looking for the Yin Iron in the infamously fatal Burial Mounds?" Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes.

"I thought we might tell him we're going on a night-hunt."

"Lan SiZhui, remember they don't know you anymore. You don't have privileges like that anymore." Lan JingYi said. The reminder hurt, but it was true, and Lan SiZhui needed to keep it in mind as well.

"We could say my uncle wrote me and requested I return home with you two." Jin Ling said.

"But your uncles are here, and Jin GuangYao is..." Lan SiZhui started, then trailed off at Jin Ling's look.

“Lan SiZhui, I admire you. You’re truly the model disciple of the GusuLan Sect. But let me tell you something – when it comes to getting into trouble, you’re the worst I’ve ever met.” Lan JingYi laughed at Jin Ling’s words and Lan SiZhui’s face heated at the teasing. Once they all calmed down, Jin Ling said: “It is decided then. Maybe one of you could go to Gusu, write a letter in my uncle’s name and send it to me, so I can show evidence to Grandmaster.”

“Why does it need to be done from Gusu?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused.

“Because if we just show up with a letter while no courier had been by, it would be suspicious.”

“Oh.”

“I told you, you’re terrible at getting into trouble!” Jin Ling huffed, affectionately annoyed. Lan SiZhui didn’t know that was a thing.

“Ah.” Lan JingYi jumped on his feet, going over to Lan SiZhui’s shelves. He took some blank papers from it, then settled at the table, opening the inkpot there. “Alright, what should the letter say?”

“Hm...” Jin Ling rubbed his chin in thought. “It shouldn’t be something that would sound like an emergency, I do not want to alert them. Something that would require immediate attention but a reason for all three of us to go.”

“So, we can’t say your uncle fell ill.” Lan JingYi tapped his chin with the end of the brush in thought.

“And we shouldn’t indicate we’re going to Lanling anyways. If asked, one might figure out we’ve never went there.”

Lan SiZhui had an idea, but didn’t want to dictate it to them, so he just reached out, taking the brush and paper from Lan JingYi and started writing. The other two watched him with surprise and anticipation, then when he was done, he blew on the paper to dry the ink and passed the letter to Jin Ling. He read it aloud:

“‘*Dear nephew,*’ uncle would never write such a thing, he usually starts his letters with ‘Jin Ling!’”

“Just read it!” Lan JingYi told him impatiently. Jin Ling sent him an annoyed look but did as told.

“‘*Dear nephew, I am troubled as I write this letter for you. I do not wish to take you away from your studies early, but I am afraid this matter cannot wait for the renowned Lan Lectures to finish. You have requested me to let you know if any new information is revealed about your late uncle, your friend, Lan SiZhui’s adoptive father.*’” He paused, looking up at Lan SiZhui questioningly, but he just gestured him to keep going.

“‘*I hope this letter reaches you in time as the information I’ve found is time-sensitive. I have looked into your uncle’s case and of his family. I have found someone in Yunmeng who might*



*be able to answer some of the questions you and Lan SiZhui might have. The issue is, the person this information is coming from is sick. The healers predict he does not have much time left before old age takes him.*

*“I leave the choice whether to visit him up to you. I have heard he is resided in YiLing. I do not know exactly where he lives, but ask around the town and someone might be able to help you with the matter. I know your investigation had been sluggish at best, and I hope with this, I can relieve your troubles. Our fight before you departed for Gusu left me with a weight on my heart, knowing I did not let you discover who your family were.*

*“Now I’d like to relieve this burden off my shoulders and of yours as well. I give you permission to pursue this investigation on your own – and I predict, with the two Lan disciples you became close to. I only wish for your safe return, whenever it may be. Be safe and do your best. Your Uncle.’*

“Like I need his permission to do as I like!” Jin Ling huffed. At that, two forehead-ribbons rose to his friends’ hairline. He pressed his mouth together lightly. “Right. It’s not real.”

“Lan SiZhui, you have kept secrets from us!” Lan JingYi turned to his friend with a wide grin. “Who knew you could twist such clever tales!” Lan SiZhui’s face heated in a blush as he looked down. It wasn’t that he wanted to contribute their lie, or that he liked to fabricate such a blatantly unreal story, but Jin Ling and Lan JingYi already made up their minds, so he could at least make sure they did not get found out.

“I thought maybe with this, Grandmaster would be empathetic towards our case. Hanguang-Jun had most likely already told him about what I said about us investigating my past.”

“It is highly convincing I think.” Jin Ling nodded.

“I agree.” Lan JingYi nodded. “You even referred to a fight.” He grinned, visibly delighted at his friend’s craftiness. Lan SiZhui’s face burned even hotter.

“I imagined it wouldn’t be realistic for Jin Ling to have left without a fight.”

“Very clever!” Jin Ling nodded. “Now we just need to send it from outside the Cloud Recesses.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Lan JingYi took the letter. They agreed and separated for the night.



The letter arrived two days later after lunch. It was quite a public setting to get such a letter, and Lan JingYi tried his best not to appear as smug as he did as the letter was handed over to Jin Ling in front of the Lanshi, where the disciples were waiting around for the lectures to start. The paper that covered the letter was of the Jin Sect, a pale yellow with the white peony painted on it. Lan SiZhui wondered where Lan JingYi might’ve got it from.

They were sitting around, low murmurs of conversations around them lulling them. Jin Ling looked up at them with wide eyes, not having expected he’d need to perform reading the

letter in public, then he swallowed and opened it.

His face was in a frown as he read through it, then he snorted. And passed it to Lan SiZhui, like he was annoyed. Lan SiZhui read it as well – it was copied by a stranger, the handwriting not familiar. The words were the same. He looked up once he was done reading it, and much like the other night, Jin Ling exclaimed:

“Like I need his permission to do anything! Who is he to make this about himself again?!” His voice, perhaps, was a bit too loud, too theatrical.

“Jin Ling...”

“No, Lan SiZhui! He is my uncle, true, but that doesn’t mean he has the right to keep such things from me!” He sounded genuinely upset and Lan SiZhui wrinkled his forehead as he looked over at Lan JingYi, who just shrugged.

“Hey, Jin Ling!” They heard someone call from the side and looked over. Wei WuXian was watching them with narrowed eyes. “What is the matter? Who is the letter from?”

“It’s none of your business!”

“It’s none of my business, why is it any of Lan SiZhui’s business?” He nodded to the letter still in Lan SiZhui’s hand. “If he can know, why can’t I?”

“It’s family business!”

“Ah, that explains why he’s so upset!” Someone said from the Nie Sect.

“I’m not upset!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Boys.” ZeWu-Jun’s unexpected voice called from the side and everyone looked over. “Jin Ling, if the matters in the letter are private, you might want to process it in private.” He said kindly.

“Yeah, Jin Ling, don’t make a scene.” Wei WuXian grinned teasingly.

“I’m not making a scene! It’s my uncle who thinks—“ He cut himself off then huffed. “Whatever!” He snapped, tearing the letter out of Lan SiZhui’s hand and storming inside the Lanshi. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look, then Lan JingYi shrugged. With that, their act was over for now.

They decided that before dinner, they will go to the Grandmaster. They didn’t expect to find ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun in the Lanshi with him, and bowed to them deeply, the letter clutched in Jin Ling’s hand tightly. ZeWu-Jun eyed it curiously.

“Boys, what can we do for you?” He asked softly.

“ZeWu-Jun, as you might know, I have received a letter this afternoon from my uncle.” Hanguang-Jun nor Grandmaster seemed surprised about that. ZeWu-Jun nodded. “In the letter he...” Jin Ling trailed off, hesitantly. “Perhaps, it is easier to explain if I tell you about

my and Lan SiZhui's relationship?" He looked over at Lan SiZhui, who was not expecting to be part of the explanation.

"Your late uncle was his adoptive father before he died." Hanguang-Jun said evenly. Jin Ling seemed surprised but nodded.

"Yes. But neither of us know much about him. Lan SiZhui's memories are murky at best about that time and I was only a few months old when he died. My other uncle never really told me about him. It was only recently we've learned about this connection." He paused and ZeWu-Jun opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but remained silent in the end, sharing a look with his brother. "After learning the fact, I asked my uncle about him, but he..." His fist tightened around the letter. He was either genuinely upset or a great actor.

"Why does this concern us?" Grandmaster decided to ask.

"The letter I received this afternoon tells us about a person who might be able to give us answers about my late uncle, but he is sick. Uncle wrote the healers don't expect him to live for long. We've hoped..." Jin Ling trailed off, looking over at the two Lan disciples, either hoping them to help out or for confirmation, Lan SiZhui didn't know.

"Grandmaster, Second Young Master Lan, ZeWu-Jun. These disciples humbly request you to let us leave to pursue this clue in our investigation." Lan SiZhui stepped forward and bowed. The three seniors shared a look.

"Jin Ling, we do not wish to violate your privacy, but may we see the letter?" ZeWu-Jun asked carefully. Jin Ling looked over at Lan JingYi, who nodded to him encouragingly and Jin Ling stepped forward, holding out the crumpled paper. ZeWu-Jun read it quickly before passing it to Grandmaster.

"And Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi would go with you?" Grandmaster asked once he was finished with the letter.

"If Grandmaster Lan lets us." Lan SiZhui bowed again.

"I understand why Lan SiZhui would leave, but what reason does Lan JingYi have to?" ZeWu-Jun asked with furrowed brows.

"ZeWu-Jun, Lan SiZhui is like my brother." The simple statement seemed to convince Lan XiChen, but Grandmaster was still looking at them strictly.

"Go now. I need to think this through." He said at last. His nephews seemed surprised at his lack of answer, so were the teens. In the end, they just bowed and left, Jin Ling nervously fidgeting with his hands.

"Did I mess up?" He asked quietly. Lan SiZhui shook his head. He had no idea and he was just as anxious about it as Jin Ling seemed to be, so they left the matter for the time being and headed to dinner.

Awaiting Grandmaster's approval was nerve-wrecking. And it wasn't just Lan SiZhui's anxiety about lying that kept their little group tense. The next day they were walking around until Lan JingYi groaned and halted, sat down on some stairs, holding Zhameng vertically in front of him, so it touched the ground, he gripped it tightly and leaned his forehead against the hilt. At first, Lan SiZhui was concerned he was feeling sick until Lan JingYi groaned and whined:

"What takes him so long?" At that, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look. Jin Ling huffed and leaned against a pillar, their formation almost the mirror image of how they settled a few days ago to discuss how they were going to break into the Burial Mounds.

"Hanguang-Jun indicated they were suspicious of us a few days ago." Lan SiZhui offered. "Maybe they're reluctant to let us out of their sights?"

"Can you imagine ZeWu-Jun be suspicious of anything?" Jin Ling clicked his tongue. "My uncle deceived him for almost fifteen years."

"Hey!" Lan JingYi looked up with furrowed brows and a frown.

"I'm just calling it as I see it!" Jin Ling defended.

"Do you have to always insult someone?" Lan JingYi glared at him.

"Just because you worship the guy—"

"I don't!"

"You do! What makes him so fucking perfect? It's not like he saved you or anything!"

"Jin Ling." Lan SiZhui warned.

"If you want to know, he did." Lan JingYi glared. "When my parents died, he was the one to convince the elders to let me stay in the Cloud Recesses. If it wasn't for him, I'd have lived on the streets for years. I know it must be an unfamiliar concept to you, but some people care about others."

"Still, he's not perfect!"

"Did I say he was? But why do you have to be so rude all the time? He did nothing to you to earn the way you talk about him." Jin Ling looked away, jaw clenching, cheeks reddening. There was a pause, then Lan SiZhui broke the silence.

"What if they're trying to track down who sent the letter?"

"I paid the courier extra to say it was from Lanling if anyone was to question him." Lan JingYi said. Lan SiZhui felt like he should've thought of that, and was glad Lan JingYi did. At the same time, he was a little disturbed. This was just too much. Going out of their way so much to lie...

“What if they don’t let us go?” Jin Ling said, leaning his head back against the pillar. “We were so sure this would work.”

“They can’t keep you here past the lectures.” Lan JingYi pointed out. “And we’ve only asked for permission to state Lan SiZhui’s anxiety. If it comes to it, we can still leave in secret.” This line of thought made Lan SiZhui think about all the ways the Sect elders could prevent them from leaving. They could take away their jade tokens. They could lock them up! Anxiety gripped into his stomach tight.

“JingYi...” He started, unsure how to tell him they definitely weren’t going to sneak out without permission.

“Lan SiZhui, didn’t you agree to help us?” Jin Ling raised his eyebrows at him. “And you broke so many rules already. What does one more matter?”

“A lot.” Lan SiZhui answered, annoyed to be reminded how many crimes he already committed. “This was a bad idea. We shouldn’t have lied.”

“Seriously, why are you so obsessed with the rules? One would think you die if you break some.” Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui looked away.

“Anyhow, this shouldn’t take this long.” Lan JingYi said after a lengthy pause.

“Yeah.” Jin Ling agreed, huffing. “We should just go. The longer we wait the smaller our chances of finding the—”

“ZeWu-Jun!” Lan JingYi jumped on his feet. Turning, Lan SiZhui also saw ZeWu-Jun behind them, seemingly just taking a stroll. He stopped in his tracks in front of the boys and smiled. The three of them bowed.

“Boys.” ZeWu-Jun paused, seemingly wanting to say something, but not knowing how to phrase it. He took a breath and opened his mouth to talk several times, but stopped himself. Finally, he said: “I understand that you’re eager to get on the road.” He paused. He repeated the hesitant action, then he settled on: “There are a few things we need to discuss before we let you go, and Grandmaster doesn’t have all the time to talk. Please, be patient.”

“What do you need to discuss so much?” Jin Ling frowned. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“Of course, we understand, ZeWu-Jun. We’ll be patient.” He said.

“No, SiZhui, I’m not.” Jin Ling said before ZeWu-Jun could answer. “If he has something to say to us, he should just say it.” He glared at ZeWu-Jun. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure his intervention would be appreciated, although he did not want to hear their suspicions, for he would not be able to deny them convincingly, he kept quiet, letting ZeWu-Jun decide if he wanted to answer or not. ZeWu-Jun’s smile faded and he watched Jin Ling searchingly.

“I just hope these disciples will be patient enough to wait for Grandmaster’s approval before they leave.” He said at last. Lan SiZhui only heard him less than pleasant a handful of times

and it always upset him. ZeWu-Jun, to him, was always kind and forgiving, always in good spirits. The only exception to that had been in Guanyin Temple, and afterwards.

“ZeWu-Jun, it’s not that we want to break the rules.” Lan JingYi inserted. “It’s just, this matter is, as you also know, time sensitive. We’re anxious to get there before... before it’s too late.” ZeWu-Jun’s searching gaze landed on Lan JingYi now, then moved to Lan SiZhui, who lowered his eyes.

“Lan SiZhui.” At the quiet tone, he looked up. ZeWu-Jun stepped closer and was looking down at him. “Are you also nervous to get going?” His eyebrows raised in curiosity.

Lan SiZhui swallowed, feeling like ZeWu-Jun saw right through him. Like he knew who they were, what they were about to do and that Lan SiZhui was the one who was struggling to agree to these plans. He watched ZeWu-Jun, trying to see if he knew, if that night Lan SiZhui told him too much, if he figured them out. But it was impossible. If ZeWu-Jun knew they were from the future, they wouldn’t be talking now. They would be in front of Grandmaster Lan, being questioned. Surely, ZeWu-Jun wouldn’t just keep quiet if he knew? Especially if he suspected what they were about to do?

There was a shift in the other’s eyes, and the penetrating gaze became less intense, more curious than searching. More like ZeWu-Jun, less suspicious. Did Lan SiZhui saw it right? Did ZeWu-Jun suspect them? Or did he just figure Lan SiZhui was the best behaved and least likely to lie, and tried to intimidate him?

He wasn’t sure. But ZeWu-Jun was still waiting for an answer, so he gave a small nod. ZeWu-Jun stepped back and a little amusement returned to his features. Open and unsuspecting, trusting and fond.

“I will try to urge Grandmaster Lan to make his decision as soon as possible.” He told all three of them, then inclined his head. “You should go to class, boys. Don’t get caught slacking.”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” The three of them bowed again as ZeWu-Jun went around them, continuing his stroll. For a long minute, Lan SiZhui watched his retreating back, puzzled.

“Lan SiZhui, are you coming?” Lan JingYi asked from a few feet from where he’d been standing previously. Lan SiZhui blinked away his thoughts and nodded, joining them on their way to the class.



By the time Lan QiRen summoned them again, Lan SiZhui was beyond nervous. Three days had passed and Lan SiZhui slept poorly the previous night. His stomach also hurt, and even though he tried to eat breakfast, he couldn’t keep it down. He figured it was just the nerves, so he didn’t go to the infirmary right away, but he did skip his morning classes to meditate.

He was just starting to feel better when there was a thumping on his door, Jin Ling calling out: “Lan SiZhui, are you here?”

“Come in!” He called out, shoulders tensing, nausea returning. As Jin Ling opened the door, it revealed him and Lan JingYi side by side. As soon as Jin Ling saw him, he made a face at him.

“Why are you frowning?” He turned to Lan JingYi. “Is he frowning?”

“Sorry.” Lan SiZhui schooled his features. “Why don’t you come in?” He gestured inside. He thought Jin Ling was past waiting for permission, and while he appreciated him waiting for one now, it was decidedly easier to just go with him marching in.

“We came to get you. Grandmaster wants to talk to us. You weren’t in class, so we came here to see if you were here.” Lan SiZhui’s stomach tightened. He took a deep breath and nodded.

“Can you give me a minute? I’ll be right out.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but turned away taking a few steps aimlessly to the side. Lan JingYi furrowed his brows.

“Are you okay?” He asked, tone and face concerned. Lan SiZhui smiled at him, grateful for the care.

“I’ll be out in a minute.” He nodded. Lan JingYi didn’t call him out on not giving a straight answer, just nodded and closed the door. As Lan SiZhui washed his face and put the room back in order after meditation – clenching the incense burner, putting dirty cups and the teapot on a tray to be taken to the washer room – he heard Jin Ling and Lan JingYi outside.

“What’s with him?” Jin Ling asked. Despite, judging from the distance of the sound, them stepping away from the room, he could make out the words clearly.

“What do you think?”

“If he’s so nervous, why did he agree to come?” Jin Ling sounded frustrated.

“Because he wouldn’t let us go alone.”

“He just wants to keep an eye on us. Always be there to monitor us. So bossy! He doesn’t even want to save those people.”

“That’s not true and you know that. Why do you have to be like this? You keep insulting him and never apologize. Don’t you think you’re being unnecessarily harsh on him?”

“What am I supposed to do, cling to his thighs like you do?” Jin Ling huffed.

“At least consider this is not easy for him. We’re asking him to turn against his family. Would you be able to lie to your uncle and go behind his back, do something you know he wouldn’t agree with, and not feel guilty about it?” Jin Ling didn’t answer that, and Lan SiZhui was done with his tasks, so he exited his rooms.

It wasn’t that he enjoyed eavesdropping, but knowing that Lan JingYi understood his troubles helped ease some of the tension he was feeling. As the two faced him, he smiled at his friend. Jin Ling avoided his eyes and asked offhandedly if he was ready. Giving an affirmative answer, they headed towards the Lanshi.

As they entered, ZeWu-Jun and Lan QiRen were waiting for them. They bowed and waited for them to talk.

“Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi.” Lan QiRen started. “I have come to a decision. But before I tell you about that, I have a question.”

“Yes, Grandmaster Lan.” The two Lan disciples echoed.

“This talisman of yours that you created. While we tested it in a controlled environment, it has not been confirmed it would work in a real situation. I hope you understand that testing it on your own, even though you’re almost twenty, is incredibly dangerous.” He paused as he looked over the three of them. “I would also like to remind you that deception, lying and betrayal are more than serious crimes. They are to be punished with either exile, prison sentence or execution. However, if one comes forth and comes clean on their own, we will consider a less serious punishment. With that in mind, I ask you now. Do any of you have anything to tell me and Lan XiChen?”

There was a lengthy pause. Lan SiZhui didn’t dare to look up at ZeWu-Jun nor Grandmaster. He shook his head, then heard Jin Ling huff.

“We don’t.” He said in an arrogant tone. There was another pause, and Lan SiZhui chanced a look up. ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster exchanged a look. Then Grandmaster nodded.

“Very well then. I have decided you may leave the Cloud Recesses. I expect the two disciples back by the end of the year. Jin Ling, Young Master Jin also requires your presence in Lanling by the end of the year.” Great relief flooded the three of them, but Lan SiZhui’s good mood was tempered by their exchange with Lan XiChen a few days prior and Lan QiRen’s earlier question.

“Thank you, Grandmaster Lan.” They all bowed. While they waited to be dismissed, Lan SiZhui looked at ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster carefully. Lan XiChen wasn’t looking at them, eyebrows furrowed as he looked down at his hand. He was stroking Liebing with a thumb, deep in thought. Lan QiRen was watching the three of them with narrowed eyes, then nodded.

“You may receive the usual portions you’re allowed to bring on night-hunts to aid your journey and stay for the time being, but we cannot spare more for this little adventure of yours.” He told them. “Remember that despite the nature of your journey, you’re still disciples of two major Sects. Act accordingly outside these walls as well. If that is all, you may leave.”

“Thank you, Grandmaster Lan.” The three of them bowed again, then without hesitation, Jin Ling turned and left, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui close on his heels.



## Persistence I.

“Well, this is it.” Lan JingYi said as they entered the little town by the mountains. YiLing looked a lot like when Lan SiZhui visited a few months ago – or perhaps, a few years from now. It wasn’t bursting with life, but it was considerably lively.

“We should hire a room and make a plan as to where to look for the shard.” Jin Ling said. “I doubt it will be easy to find.”

“Good idea.” Lan JingYi nodded, and so Lan SiZhui led them to the only inn in town. They hired rooms, then sat around the low table in Jin Ling’s. In the past few days while they traveled, they haven’t had time to plan, because one of them always carried an extra person on their sword and they were quick to tire. In the past day they stopped in a village not far from YiLing, then took the last of their journey on foot, which took them less than half a day.

The plan was as follows: They’d look at the Demon-Subdue Cave first. If they haven’t found it there, they’d look around the hill it stood on. If it wasn’t there either, well... Then they had no other choice, but either give up or search the whole area. Neither of them were fond of that idea.

They spent the night at the inn, then the next morning they set out. Lan JingYi prepared as many Graveyard-Purging talismans that would be enough for a smaller army, one smaller batch for each of them in a qiankun bag, the others left in their rooms. Even though in theory they could come and go with only one on their person, tests revealed that the talisman was prone to burn through quickly. It was safer to have as many on their person as possible. They had limited resources to work from as it was. Most of the talisman papers had been sacrificed for this, so Lan SiZhui hoped they’d succeed.

Their first day went like this:

They mounted their swords, Jin Ling taking Yingjiu with Lan SiZhui. They flew as high as Lan SiZhui could with the extra weight and flew above the colorless land. The Burial Mounds were truly different than how Lan SiZhui knew them. Even from so high up he could feel the resentful energy radiating from it and it showed as well. The ground wasn’t visible from the dark, ink-like fog that rolled between trees more dead than Lan SiZhui had ever seen them.

In the future, while Lan SiZhui lived there, there had been very little evidence that the Burial Mounds were so sinister. From his trips there as a junior disciple, he knew it was because most of the resentful energy had been suppressed. Most likely by Wei WuXian. It was astonishing to see just how much resentful energy had been cleared from the grounds to allow the Wen to live there safely. Whatever one’s opinion might be on the YiLing Patriarch, this was undeniable evidence of just how powerful he was. To suppress so much of the resentful energy, one had to be as strong as an army of cultivators.

The three of them shared a moment to just take in the scenery, then they descended carefully, Lan SiZhui leading the way. The talisman on his chest – his Lan Sect robes, just like Lan

JingYi's changed into some simpler ones Jin Ling had got from the guest disciples before departing from the Cloud Recesses – was a steady and solid presence.

The entrance of the cave was so swarmed by resentful energy they had to land farther from it than they've planned. Once on the ground, they were overwhelmed by it. They had to back away, cautiously, because there was none of the distance Lan JingYi had experienced in the Mingshi from the mid-low level ghost they've tested it on. The energy touched them almost, hovering a breath away from their talismans, moving with them, breathing, alive, dangerous.

"How did Wei WuXian ever survive this?" Jin Ling asked, sounding strangled. Lan SiZhui felt the same way, and he suspected Lan JingYi as well.

"I don't think survived is the right word." Lan SiZhui got past the lump in his throat.

"Let's go." It was Lan JingYi who tugged on their robes. Swords and bow at the ready, they edged their way towards the cave. The talismans held strong. Their fear did not lessen. The resentful energy closed around them and after a few steps they didn't even know where they needed to go. After what felt like forever and only maybe four full steps with hundreds of their shuffling, Lan JingYi suddenly exclaimed and bumped into Jin Ling as he took a step back.

"What is it?!" Jin Ling cried, startled.

"A fierce corpse! It took me by surprise!" He said, then stepped forward. His sword glare was no more than a faint flash. A body hit the ground. Something moved to Lan SiZhui's left and he struck, Yingjiu's glare illuminating as it hit the corpse.

"They're everywhere!" Jin Ling exclaimed as he shot arrow after arrow into the fog.

"I think we're close! I'm making a run for it!" Lan JingYi called out, then broke away from them. Before Lan SiZhui could think about following, Jin Ling took off as well. Annoyed, Lan SiZhui ran after them.

"This is stone!" Jin Ling cried from somewhere in the fog. His voice sounded enclosed, like they were in a chamber.

"We're inside!" Lan JingYi shouted.

"The magic circle!" Lan SiZhui realized. "JingYi, Jin Ling, make an evil-suppressing array!"

"We're not in position!"

"Who cares?!" Jin Ling snapped and Lan SiZhui could already see the faint glow of his spiritual energy. He followed suit and soon Lan JingYi did the same. The magic circle lit up, painting the middle of the room in a faint glow, then it started pulsing. The three teens got inside, backs to each other as they watched the circle fight off resentful energy weakly. By the time the energy leveled out in the chamber, it was still full of it, but they weren't drowning in it.

“If we ever go back to the future, I’ll have a whole library built in Lanling for Wei WuXian.” Jin Ling hissed where he held his arm with a deep frown.

“Are you injured? What happened?” Lan SiZhui asked as he stepped next to him, prying his fingers away from the bloody sleeve of his left arm.

“A fierce corpse wounded me on the way in. It got too close, I couldn’t fight it off with my bow.”

“Here.” Lan JingYi stepped up to them, reaching into his sleeve and pulling out some bandages. With Lan SiZhui, they took care of the wound, then looked around. “How are we going to find the shard here?”

“If it’s actually here at all.” Jin Ling added.

“It can’t be too hidden or else Master Wei wouldn’t have found it in the first place. Resentful energy is incredibly strong here, so something must be or must’ve happened here.” Lan SiZhui said.

“SiZhui, where did Master Wei spend most of his time when he was here?” Lan JingYi asked. “Maybe he was there so much because that’s where he’d found it.

“In the caves...” Lan SiZhui looked around. “I think that way.”

“Alright. Everyone’s talismans working fine still?” Lan JingYi looked at both of them. They nodded.

They left the circle and immediately were surrounded by resentful energy, although it was significantly weaker than before, the circle keeping it out of the main chamber. As they neared the caves, the resentful energy was changing, somewhere stronger, somewhere weaker. By the time they reached what used to be Wei WuXian’s bedchambers, there were as few as ever.

“I get it now, why Wei WuXian took shelter here.” Lan JingYi said as he looked around. “Not the nicest, but resentful energy is sparse here.”

“Perhaps whatever battle was fought here didn’t reach this place.” Jin Ling said. It didn’t look much different than in the YiLing Patriarch’s time. There were papers all over the floor, some cloths torn to pieces a bowl here, a jug there.

“Someone lived here before Master Wei.” Lan SiZhui noted as he lifted a bundle of papers. It was an untidy scrawl about collecting resentful energy! It wasn’t nearly as defined as later the YiLing Patriarch’s studies had been, but the basics were there. “Someone who also attempted to use resentful energy.” He said, looking up and over at Jin Ling and Lan JingYi. The latter blinked at him, surprised.

“Do you think it might be the person who invented the Yin Iron?”

“Wait, someone invented the thing?” Jin Ling frowned at them.

“How else would it exist?”

“I thought it was some kind of natural artefact.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“Lan SiZhui?” Lan JingYi asked, waiting for him to give one of their theories confirmation.

“The only thing I’ve heard about the Yin Iron had been what you both know as well from history lessons about the Wen war.” He admitted.

They continued their search but without any results. Feeding their talismans spiritual energy had exhausted them, so after an hour or so, Lan JingYi suggested they leave. They were not enthusiastic about going back out there, but they had no choice. This time Jin Ling stayed close to Lan JingYi, who was going to take him on his sword.

The resentful energy in front of the cave would not let them leave, so they had to go back where they’ve previously landed. It took a long time. By the time they mounted their swords, Lan SiZhui’s arm was hurting from swinging his sword so much and his Golden Core was drained. He could hardly fly high enough. Once they reached the edge of the wards, they stumbled inelegantly on the ground at the mountain path.

“They worked.” Lan JingYi panted from the ground, lying on his back, very un-Lan-like. Lan SiZhui was leaning against a tree and Jin Ling was sitting with his head bowed between his raised knees.

“What?” Jin Ling grunted.

“The talismans.” Lan JingYi huffed, a pleased grin stretching his lips wide. “I thought they wouldn’t. But they held.”

“They’re at least high level, if not master.” Lan SiZhui agreed breathlessly.

“Stop flattering him, he’ll get a big head.” Jin Ling groaned.

“The credit is not only mine.” Lan JingYi looked over to frown at his friend.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling waved a hand.

“We should head back to the inn before we fall asleep here.” Lan JingYi suggested. At that, Jin Ling groaned, but Lan SiZhui pushed himself away from the tree he’d been leaning against.

“Jin Ling, how is your arm?” Lan SiZhui asked as he stepped closer, going down on one knee to study the bandages. They were saturated with blood, but not dripping, which meant the wound was not bleeding anymore. It was a good sign.

“It hurts.”

“Let me examine it.” Lan SiZhui wasn’t a good doctor by any means, but Wen Ning and him once had a lengthy and deep discussion about medical matters, and he, just like ever disciple,

learned basic care from the Lan healers. He hoped, with this combined knowledge, he'd be able to help.

"Do as you like!" Jin Ling frowned and shook his head. Lan SiZhui did so.

"It's not as bad as I thought. There's no lingering resentful energy, and the cut is not deep. If you don't exhaust your Golden Core, it should heal within a few days. Still, when we get back, you should clean and rewrap it."

"Okay." Jin Ling sighed, like it didn't matter either way. Lan SiZhui nodded and straightened up, offering his hand. Jin Ling ignored it as he pushed himself on his feet.

They left the mountain, walking down on foot, way too exhausted to fly. As they walked through the town of YiLing, the only thing Lan SiZhui could think about was a hot bath and sleep. They wordlessly retired to their rooms. Lan JingYi, who shared with Lan SiZhui for cost's sake, was asleep in the matter of minutes. He'd not even changed into bedclothes, only shredding his outer layer and lying on top of the covers. Lan SiZhui ordered a bath and soaked until he ceased to feel like a walking corpse himself.

Clean, warm and exhausted, he was preparing for bed when there was a knock on the door. He looked over to see if Lan JingYi was still out, then went to slide the door open a sliver. Jin Ling stood there arms across his chest, looking to the side with a scoff. He opened the door wider and stepped out.

"Jin Ling, what is it?" He asked, worried. Jin Ling took a deep breath, about to speak, but then just exhaled it, jaw clenching. He needn't to say anything though, because the next moment Lan SiZhui noticed the end of some bandages peeking out from the silky Jin Sect sleeping robes. "Come in, let me take a look at your wound." He offered and Jin Ling huffed, shoulders losing some of their tension.

"Whatever." He grumbled, like this wasn't the reason he came. Lan SiZhui led him in the room and sat Jin Ling by the window, so he could see better in the fading light of the afternoon. As he worked, Jin Ling was fidgeting. Lan SiZhui didn't ask what occupied his mind, content to let Jin Ling come to him with his problems on his own. "What do you think would happen if a person without a Golden Core fell into the Burial Mounds?"

"A common person?" The question caught Lan SiZhui by surprise. He didn't know what to make of it, how did it even occur to Jin Ling? "The resentful energy is way too potent there. If a cultivator wouldn't survive, a common person would die for sure."

"Yes, but what would happen to him? I mean, a cultivator's Golden Core would become poisoned by the resentful energy and it would kill him from the inside. But what would happen to someone without a Golden Core?"

"It would tear him apart as well, but in different ways. Drive him mad, first, I imagine... Poison his mind first, destroy it, before it would tear his body apart, if the fierce corpses didn't get to him first." Jin Ling closed his eyes tightly at that, and for a moment, Lan SiZhui thought his handling of the wound was too painful and he softened his wipes with the cloth he used to clean it thoroughly.

“Would he... is there a way he'd survive?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, confused. “I highly doubt it. At best, he'd, too, become a fierce corpse. Why are you asking?”

Jin Ling shook his head. “If he...” He trailed off, shaking his head again. “Forget it.” He said quietly, then hissed as Lan SiZhui poured some water on the wound to get rid of the last of blood.

“Sorry.” He said quietly. Jin Ling said nothing as Lan SiZhui prepared the bandages.

“Have you ever been wounded?” Jin Ling asked.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Mostly broken ribs. I once broke my arm. Another time I have been wounded by a sword, but it was not as severe as this wound.”

“I've only had scraped knees and elbows. One time I almost broke my shoulder, but it turned out I just sprained it.”

“You've never been wounded before?” Lan SiZhui looked up in surprise and Jin Ling shook his head with a dark expression.

“The first time I was severely hurt was on Dafan mountain by the Dancing Fairy.” His tone was dark and bitter. “And that was because uncle left to show Lan WangJi I could hunt on my own.” Lan SiZhui didn't know what to say to that. “Hanguang-Jun must be an amazing teacher.” He said, but there was no praise in his words, only resentment. Lan SiZhui looked up in surprise.

“Jin Ling... Hanguang-Jun...”

“Don't jump to his defense!” Jin Ling exclaimed, then winced at his own tone, looking over at the still slumbering Lan JingYi. He lowered his voice as he turned to look out the window then. “I didn't mean it like that. Maybe if my uncle let me get hurt, I'd be as good of a cultivator as you are.” The rare moment of self-deprecation caught Lan SiZhui by surprise, again. It seemed like Jin Ling was in a certain mood today.

“You are as good as I am. As good as Lan JingYi is. You are a good cultivator. Scars don't testify. What matters is what is in your heart.”

“Stop that.” Jin Ling snarled at him. “I hate it when you do that. Don't praise people who don't deserve it.”

“But you do.” Lan SiZhui's eyebrows furrowed.

“I stabbed your adoptive father! My own uncle!” Jin Ling didn't temper his tone, but Lan SiZhui felt his words too important to correct him.

He wasn't sure where all this came from but he didn't like it at all. He paused at tending to the wound, then discreetly checked Jin Ling's Golden Core. It was perfectly fine, so no resentful energy lingered that would prompt his words. It must've been on his mind for some

time now, then. Surely, that day's adventures lowered his guard and allowed him to speak his mind more clearly, so Lan SiZhui decided to indulge him.

"Jin Ling, do you know why us, Lan disciples are so ready to forgive even serious crimes?"

"I bet there's a rule to that." He scoffed. Lan SiZhui smiled and nodded.

"There is. But the truth is, the rules dictate how we behave, but not how we feel. We're still human. Just because a rule says I should forgive Jin GuangYao for deceiving and hurting my —ZeWu-Jun, doesn't mean I don't feel mad, betrayed, hurt and resentful towards him."

"Hard to imagine!" Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Lan SiZhui nodded.

"It is. But... I do. Or I did, at least." He sighed softly. "But the Lan Sect would've been destroyed several hundred times if we always felt that way when someone wronged us and we weren't allowed to express it. The rules don't say we're not allowed to feel these things, but they do say we must understand others' motivations. Do I agree with what Jin GuangYao did? Not at all. But I do understand him.

"As much as I dislike it, I understand why he felt the way he did. And I know a person cannot control how he feels. He can control his actions, and that is why there are rules in the Cloud Recesses. Even if I feel like killing Jin GuangYao before he commits his crimes now, I know it is wrong to do so, so I don't. Because even though I am angry at him, I can control my actions and I don't need to become someone like him in order to right the wrongs.

"This is why I am against our plans as well. I understand where you're coming from, I understand the need to save your parents and all these people, but that doesn't mean it's the right thing to do."

"Then what is the right thing to do, Lan SiZhui?" Jin Ling frowned at him. "Let them die and just sit back and watch?"

Lan SiZhui shook his head. "I don't know what the right thing to do in this situation is. That's why I'm still helping you, despite my apprehension. But that's... That's not the point I'm trying to make." He shook his head again, trying to pick up his train of thought again. "I forgive Jin GuangYao because I understand his motivation. And while I don't agree with them, I know he couldn't control how he felt. His crimes, for me, mainly lie in that he chose not to let go of his hurt, but to act from the malice and resentment born from it.

"I forgive you about stabbing Wei WuXian, because I saw your guilt and I saw your actions didn't reflect hatred but hurt. I understand why you did it, and while I'm not happy that you did it, I cannot say with a clear conscience that I hold this against you in any way. I forgive you, because I know this crime was committed born from your hurt rather than real malice. And more importantly, I forgive you, because I see that you feel guilty about it."

"Of course, I do!" Jin Ling snapped, looking up with familiar fire in his eyes. "But that shouldn't mean you forgive me. I don't forgive myself, why would you?!" Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“After what happened at Mo Manor... Ah, have you heard about that?” Jin Ling nodded. “After that, Hanguang-Jun came to me. He told me something I’ve found to be greatly true. He said: ‘Mistakes had been made before you made them and will be made after you’re gone. Feeling guilty about it won’t make it right. Forgive yourself, learn from it and do better in the future’.”

It felt like a lifetime ago that his adoptive father knocked on his doors, while Wei WuXian first came to the Cloud Recesses in Mo XuanYu’s body. He’d still been unconscious and Hanguang-Jun visited Lan SiZhui, sensing he was feeling guilty. His words eased that guilt even if they were harsh, and he wished they had the same effect on Jin Ling.

“Easy for you to say.” Jin Ling mumbled under his breath. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“It is not. Despite what you think, I have made many and serious mistakes. Some cost lives, lives that are lost because of me, the decisions I’ve made. I am single-handedly responsible for the annihilation of the Mo Clan, for instance. If I called for Hanguang-Jun sooner, if I wasn’t so caught up in excitement and wanting to prove myself, some of them would still be alive.” Jin Ling opened his mouth but Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I am not feeling guilty about it, not anymore. I let go of it and forgave myself, because if I did not, I would’ve never gone on a night-hunt again, and I love to practice cultivation too much and helping people is my responsibility. I made a mistake, I learned from it and I became better by it. It is as simple as that, but getting there had not been. I’m not going to tell you to forgive yourself just like that. It is your journey to take. But I do wish to tell you, what you don’t seem to realize, you are allowed to forgive yourself.”

“Hanguang-Jun shouldn’t have let you go on that night-hunt alone then!” Jin Ling, sensing he was finally allowed to speak, snapped. Lan SiZhui shrugged, a rare casual gesture.

“That is up to Hanguang-Jun’s own conscience to battle with.” Jin Ling looked at him wide-eyed. Lan SiZhui chuckled. “Before we came to Mo Manor, we stopped at some smaller villages, helping out. Circumstances and spiritual activity in the area had suggested it was a mere matter of resentful ghosts returning after death. We’ve night-hunted alone for days before arriving to Mo Manor and thinking it would be a similar matter, Hanguang-Jun left to take care of something on his own, something that is not uncommon in night-hunts. Everything pointed to it being an easy case. I do not hold it against Hanguang-Jun. He’d made a mistake just like I did when I didn’t ask for his help sooner. It is not up to me to judge him for that.”

“How stupid.” Jin Ling muttered as he looked away. Lan SiZhui realized he’d been holding the bandages, playing with them as he spoke, and returned to tending to the wound.

He did not speak, even though they left the topic whether Jin Ling is a good cultivator open. Lan SiZhui thought he had just provided a lot to think about for Jin Ling, and he had a lot of self-searching to do. He did not wish to add to that, besides, maybe he’d come to realize on his own that once he was able to forgive himself, not everything would look so dark and bitter in his eye, not even his own self-worth.



He supposed, even if they could not save people, they still benefitted from this trip to the past, if for nothing else but to learn how to be their own people. Lan SiZhui knew he depended too much on the Lan Sect rules, and even on his trip with Wen Ning, he wasn't able to let them go. He wished to learn how to be Lan SiZhui, and not just the number one Lan disciple. Jin Ling held onto anger and guilt like they were his only friends, and he needed to see people wouldn't abandon him even if he wasn't someone's son or someone's nephew. Lan JingYi needed to realize the world wasn't as black-and-white as he'd thought, and that he couldn't save the world.

They all needed to do some soul-searching, Lan SiZhui mused as he finished wrapping Jin Ling's first real battle wound. As he finished, he put his hand on Jin Ling's arm, squeezing reassuringly.

"Go, have some rest. It'll help you heal." Jin Ling seemed to consider answering but, in the end, he just nodded and walked away. Lan SiZhui took his own advice and went to bed early as well.



"This will take forever like this." Lan JingYi said four days later. The previous day Jin Ling had been well enough for them to chance their search again, but being outside the Cave, without the magic circle, proved to drain their spiritual energy and with that, the effects of their Graveyard-Purging talismans' all that faster. They had to return soon and it didn't go without issues either. "Jin Ling is injured again and we've barely took a look around."

"It's not my fault!" Jin Ling snapped irritably, rubbing at his thigh of the leg that was put on pillows to be level, an ugly gash from a fierce corpse's sword bandaged by Lan SiZhui the previous day. It wasn't as bad as the wound on his shoulder had been, but it bruised much worse, making it sore.

"I didn't say it was!" Lan JingYi raised annoyed eyebrows. "Look, I hate to ask you, but how would you feel about getting a new sword?"

"What?!"

"It's not like you're not good with the bow and arrows, but you don't have any spiritual tools, that's why you've been injured both times we went there and us not. You didn't have the spiritual tool to fend off the creatures effectively. Besides, we wouldn't need to carry you on our swords."

Lan SiZhui nodded when Lan JingYi looked over at him hesitantly, as if asking if his idea was sound or not. Still, Jin Ling was not impressed.

"I don't need another sword! I'm fine!"

"Think about it! It would be very beneficial. And wouldn't it be better than carrying your father's sword all the time?" Lan SiZhui sent a warning look towards Lan JingYi, but it was too late. Jin Ling sprang on his feet like he wasn't sporting an ugly cut on one.

“How dare you!” He yelled. “My father’s sword is an expensive and well-made one that was given to me by my uncle when I turned thirteen!”

“Jin Ling, please calm down.” Lan SiZhui placated. “Lan JingYi didn’t mean it like that. We just think you’d greatly benefit from having a sword.”

“I am not getting a new sword because I have one at home! I’m done with this conversation!” He exclaimed and with that stormed out of the Lan disciples’ rooms. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look, but none of them followed.

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Four days later they set off again. Jin Ling’s shoulder was completely healed and the gash on his leg was closing up nicely. They landed near the cave like the last two times and the fight began almost immediately. It took a while of fight and search, until they realized they’ve gotten swept into the turmoil in front of the Demon-Subdue Cave.

“We need to get inside, my talisman is burning!” Lan JingYi suddenly exclaimed.

“Go!” Lan SiZhui yelled. It never happened before, so far they went in twice and used as many talismans as well. The resentful energy must’ve recognized from the last two times where they would go and gathered there, which was both terrifying and fascinating. Lan SiZhui didn’t see either of his peers as he ran into the cave. He hoped they made it.

“Evil-Suppressing Array!” He called out and immediately saw a faint glow of spiritual energy. At least one of them made it inside. As soon as the array was formed, the inky fog cleared and Lan SiZhui faced Lan JingYi. Both their eyes were wide.

“Where is Jin Ling?” Lan JingYi asked as he looked around, then they started calling out for him in hopes he was nearby.

“Jin Ling!”

“Jin Ling!”

Then they heard noises from the outside, grunts and cries that did not belong to the corpses.

“Jin Ling!”

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi stepped forward, but before he could thrust himself into the fight as well, Lan SiZhui pulled out a qiankun bag and from it a guqin they’d also borrowed from the Cloud Recesses. Lan SiZhui started to play. He played *Cleansing* with as much spiritual energy as he could pour into it without risking his talisman and his way back out.

Jin Ling stumbled into the cave at the end of the song. He had some cuts on his face, but no further serious injury showed.

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi cried as the other boy joined them in the circle. Lan SiZhui bagged the guqin and stood next to Lan JingYi, assessing Jin Ling’s state. “Are you alright?”

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” Jin Ling stared down at his hand in fascination where it held into his bow.

“What is it?” Lan SiZhui took his hand and examined it, but there was nothing on it.

“I—I don’t know. I’m not sure.” Jin Ling said, then shook his head. “I’m fine.” He tore his hand from Lan SiZhui’s grip and straightened. “You two good?”

Just as he asked, the three of their talismans burned off their chests. Lan JingYi didn’t even pause, slapping another on the two of them before one on himself. They activated it and the warm hum of the protection they hadn’t noticed disappearing was back.

“I assume this isn’t a good sign?” Jin Ling cocked an eyebrow at Lan JingYi, who shook his head.

“The resentful ghosts and bodies had learned where we’d come.” Lan SiZhui said and Lan JingYi and Jin Ling looked at him with the same fearful fascination he felt when he realized it. “The next time we return, there might be even more of them.”

“Great.” Jin Ling threw up his arms. “We’ve wasted weeks on nothing but injuries.”

“Not necessarily.” Lan SiZhui shifted his weight from leg to leg. “I have an idea, but I’m not sure it would work. And I need the two of you to guard me, for I will not be able to feed spiritual energy into my talisman. That is why I didn’t offer this before.”

“What are you going to do?” Lan JingYi asked, eyes suspicious.

“I am going to inquire the spirit about the Yin Iron.”

“Oh.”

“Is that a good idea?” Jin Ling looked around. “Isn’t that just going to attract even more spirits here?”

“If we get an answer from them, we might not need to return.” Lan SiZhui said. Jin Ling and Lan JingYi shared a look, then nodded, silently agreeing with each other and with Lan SiZhui.

“I don’t know how long we’ll last, so be quick.” Jin Ling said, readying his bow. Lan SiZhui nodded and pulled out his guqin again, sitting in the middle of the magic circle with his friends with their back to him, protecting him. He closed his eyes and started to play.

The questioning went like this:

*“Is there anyone here?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Do you know about the Yin Iron?”*

“Yes.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“No.” He paused, pressing his lips together. He closed his eyes again.

“Is it in the Burial Mounds?”

“No.”

“Was it ever here?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to it?”

“It is gone.” Lan SiZhui was annoyed. There had to be a way to get answers more elaborate than that.

“Can you tell me what happened to the Yin Iron?”

“The Sects came and took it from Xue ChongHai.”

“Who was Xue ChongHai?”

“He was the grandmaster who corrupted the Yin Iron.”

“Lan SiZhui, hurry up!” He repressed a sigh and kept playing.

“How did he corrupt it?”

“He fed the Yin Iron resentful energy and grievance, he sacrificed live people. He controlled beasts with it and killed thousands and thousands.”

“Why?”

“The Yin Iron is a natural treasure, not obeying to any master. He fed it energy to control it but he couldn’t, so he turned it evil. He thought if he controlled evil things, he could make the world better.”

“What happened to him?”

“Lan SiZhui!”

“Just a little more!” He called back, not looking up to see his friends battle.

“His mind corrupted with the Yin Iron, and he became hungry for more power. The five Sects then marched to his home and a great battle took place here. Wen Mao was the hero who cut his head off.”

“What happened to the Yin Iron?”

*“The five Sects later had united to suppress and break the Yin Iron in pieces, hiding the fragments in places where good spiritual energy was the strongest in the world.”*

Lan SiZhui sucked in a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding while the spirit told his tale. Finally!

*“Do you know what those places are?”*

*“Mortals do not possess that knowledge.”*

Before Lan SiZhui could question him further, ask what he meant by that, the magic circle broke and Lan JingYi cried out.

“We have to go, *now!*” Jin Ling urged as well.

“Do you have the answer?” Lan JingYi asked Lan SiZhui as he put away his guqin and unsheathed his sword.

“Doesn’t matter!” Jin Ling groaned as he pushed Lan JingYi into the black fog. “Let’s go!” Lan SiZhui left behind him. They reached the point where they could get on their swords and Jin Ling barely caught Lan SiZhui’s outstretched hand. With a last swipe of his bow, when Lan SiZhui thought he’d seen some spiritual energy glow as well, he turned and mounted Yingjiu behind Lan SiZhui. Once they were in the air, they rushed out and like the previous two times, collapsed just outside the wards. After they’ve rested for some time, Lan JingYi asked:

“Did you get an answer?”

“Yes and no.” Lan SiZhui answered as he raised a hand to his forehead. Cultivators rarely got sick, but he suspected his headache was due to overusing his Golden Core, which felt awfully faint. “I need to rest.” He said, struggling to take in air.

“Lan SiZhui?”

“Lan SiZhui!”

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“He’s so pale! I’ve never seen him this hurt before. He’d been injured during night-hunts before, but never this bad.”

“He will be fine.”

“What if he won’t? What if I... What if I accidentally killed him? I didn’t mean to!”

“Shut up! You didn’t kill anyone, accidental or not. Now calm down and come here.”

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When he opened his eyes, he was in his room at the inn in YiLing. Someone was holding his wrist, feeling his pulse and feeding spiritual energy into him. He blinked, feeling out his own injuries, but other than some hunger and a dull headache, he felt fine. He looked to the side, finding Lan JingYi there, face uncharacteristically serious as he transferred his own spiritual energy into him.

“JingYi.” He said quietly, throat raw and aching. Lan JingYi closed off the link and just then opened his eyes, blinking at him, like he didn’t expect Lan SiZhui to be there.

“SiZhui! You’re okay, thank heavens.” He sighed and the tension in his shoulders dropped visibly. “I’ve never transferred spiritual energy, I’ve only seen Hanguang-Jun do it before.” He huffed. “I hoped it would work.”

“I’m fine.” Lan SiZhui confirmed and pushed himself up. His joints were sore, he noticed, a deep ache he hadn’t felt before. Before he could ask what happened, the door opened and Jin Ling entered with a tray in his hand, stacked with food. He halted upon seeing Lan SiZhui sitting up in bed, then shut the door, put the tray down and looked at him with his hands on his hips.

“Finally, you’re awake!” He huffed as he marched over, knocking Lan JingYi’s hand away and feeling Lan SiZhui’s pulse. “See? I told you he would be fine.” Jin Ling told Lan JingYi.

“What happened?” Lan SiZhui asked before they could start bickering again.

“We have just left the Burial Mounds when suddenly, you fainted. We tried to wake you, but your Golden Core was completely drained. We carried you back and you were in a coma for five days before your spiritual energy restored.” Lan JingYi said.

“For five days?” Lan SiZhui blinked at them, surprised.

“And we had to figure out how to help you. The innkeeper told us about someone nearby who could help, but we wanted to wait and see if you’d come to on your own.” Jin Ling frowned at him. “Why didn’t you tell us you were so poorly, I’d have ridden with Lan JingYi on our way out!”

“I didn’t feel it until we were outside the wards.” Lan SiZhui sighed. He looked over the table at the tray. Jin Ling noticed the direction of his interest and snapped:

“Well, what are you waiting for? I won’t bring your food to your bed!” Lan SiZhui smiled at him and with Lan JingYi’s help, he went to the table and sat. Jin Ling unstacked the food piled on the tray. There was enough for the three of them. They didn’t speak while eating, which Lan SiZhui was grateful for. After they were finished, he felt almost normal again. He sighed contently.

“Lan SiZhui, in the Demon-Subdue Cave, you’ve performed *Inquiry*. Do you remember it?”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded at Lan JingYi’s question and managed to recall everything he’d heard from the ghost that day. He finished with the last one: “And then I asked if it knew where those places were. Its answer was: Mortals do not possess that knowledge.”

“What does that mean?” Lan JingYi wrinkled his forehead. Lan SiZhui shook his head, clueless. Jin Ling sighed.

“Well, we can think more of that tomorrow. It is late and the two of us didn’t get much rest while we were caring for you.” He told Lan SiZhui, who lowered his eyes, guilty. “Let’s meet at breakfast in the dining area. I’m sick of these rooms.” They agreed and Jin Ling left for the night.



“Lan SiZhui, how are you feeling?” Lan JingYi asked, once Lan SiZhui appeared in the dining area of the inn. Him and Jin Ling were already seated, drinking tea and eating their breakfast in a slow pace. The inn had opened part of its walls for the morning, and the crisp morning air felt refreshing after the stuffy room. Lan SiZhui sat next to his friends, and ordered breakfast when the waiter rushed over with more tea for them.

“I’m feeling much better.” Lan SiZhui answered truthfully. Most of his aches were gone, though some remained of his headache, he suspected some more food and water will help with that. He slept in late, too, but that was to be expected.

“I’m feeling better as well.” Jin Ling said. “Resting really did help.”

“How are your wounds?” Lan SiZhui asked him.

“Completely healed.” He nodded. Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling... let’s talk about our work.” Lan JingYi wrinkled his forehead a worried tone in his voice alarming his friends.

“Did something happen at night?” Jin Ling frowned at him. Realizing how concerned he was making his friends, Lan JingYi schooled his features into something less troubled and blinked at them wide-eyed.

“No, not at all. Well, I suppose in a way. After Lan SiZhui went to sleep again, I did some inventory.” He paused. “We’re running low on money. It’s not bad, but we’ve been staying in YiLing for almost two weeks. I’ve counted our money to last for one week in YiLing and then we’d move on and camp in the forest.”

“We were so sure the Yin Iron would be here...” Jin Ling muttered under his breath, looking down. “Where is it then?” He looked up. “The shard we suspected would be in the Cold Pond Cave was nowhere to be found by the time we got there. The shard we suspected would be in the Demon-Subdue Cave was gone by the time we got there. We have evidence that both had been present at these places before. We weren’t wrong about the locations. Why can’t we find them then?”

“What the spirit said, mortals do not possess the knowledge. Maybe we cannot find them, because we’re mortals?” Lan JingYi asked as more tea and Lan SiZhui’s breakfast was brought. He pushed it aside in favor of the conversation.

“Wen RuoHan is mortal. He still found and collected the pieces. How?” Lan SiZhui thought out loud.

“Remember our theory, that if we had possession of one piece, it may help us track down the others?” Jin Ling said after a pause. “What if he has a piece and it helps him find the others?”

“That makes sense.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Then we’re quite at a disadvantage.” Lan JingYi said. “We do not have any shards to aid us and the spirit’s answer was not helpful either.”

“What if...” Jin Ling started, then trailed off with a frown, shaking his head. “Forget it.”

“Jin Ling, any idea is welcome. What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked eagerly. Jin Ling shook his head.

“I was just thinking about the spirit’s words. ‘Mortals do not possess this knowledge’. It implies that others do.”

“What are you saying?” Lan JingYi frowned as well.

“Mortals do not have the knowledge. What about those who are not mortals?”

“Immortal cultivators?” Lan SiZhui shared a thoughtful look with Lan JingYi.

“Think about it. Lan Yi had been caring for one shard. If the Yin Iron had been in the Burial Mounds, resentful ghosts, who are not mortals cared for it.”

“The shards... Could it be that they’re hidden by immortal beings?” Lan JingYi’s face brightened.

“But the Burial Mounds is not a place where good energy flows.” Lan SiZhui argued. “The spirit said the shards were hidden where good energy was the strongest in the world. Lan Yi’s Cold Pond Cave makes sense, because Xiawu is a natural healing spot, a powerful well for good energy.”

“But the Burial Mounds are full of resentful energy.” Lan JingYi countered. “It is strongly warded against cultivators and it is quite fatal to enter. We barely survived entering ourselves. If I were to hide such a powerful weapon, I’d hide it there for sure.”

“That is true.” Lan SiZhui said.

“But neither shards are there anymore.” Jin Ling said. “If they were, someone had taken them. What if Wen RuoHan already has possession of all three of his pieces?”

“They why didn’t he use it until the Sunshot Campaign?” Lan JingYi asked. “If he has them already, what sense does it make to hold the Indoctrination, to burn down not only the Cloud Recesses, but Lotus Pier as well?” He shook his head. “I don’t think he has them, or if he does, he is still waiting to use them for some reason. It might be because he is looking for the fourth shard. So, we still need to find that one and get it before he does.”



“Alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “How do we find it?”

“Xiao XingChen!” Jin Ling suddenly exclaimed.

“He could help?” Lan JingYi asked.

“No, him!” Jin Ling jumped on his feet and rushed out of the dining area. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a startled look, then quickly picked up their swords and ran after the boy. They weren’t going far, only down the street, where Jin Ling had already stopped a young man dressed in white robes with black accents on it. He had beautiful, gentle features, and surely, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi recognized him too, even though it was not as obvious without the blindfold he’d been buried in. They’ve never seen his eyes before, but now, Lan SiZhui couldn’t stop looking at them.

“Master Xiao!” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi beamed as they bowed to him deeply. The young man seemed confused, but returned the bow with a kind smile.

“I apologize. You seem to recognize me but I do not know your faces.” He said apologetically.

“I am Lan Yuan, Lan SiZhui from the Lan sect of Gusu.”

“I am Lan Cheng, Lan JingYi from the Lan Sect of Gusu.”

“Lan Cheng?!” Jin Ling glared at him with wide eyes. “Really?”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui sent him a warning look. Jin Ling groaned and bowed to Xiao XingChen as well.

“Jin Ling from the Jin Sect of Lanling.”

“It is an honor to meet the three of you.” Xiao XingChen said.

“Ah, it is our honor, Master Xiao.” Lan JingYi beamed.

“Master Xiao, would you care to join us for tea?” Lan SiZhui asked carefully.

“I have a long day of travel ahead of me.” Xiao XingChen said hesitantly, looking the way he was heading out of the town.

“You could spare time for one cup of tea.” Jin Ling frowned at him. Lan SiZhui was used to doing damage control for Lan JingYi, so he stepped forward without hesitation, bowing in apology.

“Master Xiao, forgive this disciple for his harshness. What he meant to say is that we are quite troubled about something and hoped your consul could help us out in our journey.”

“You are on a night-hunt?” Xiao XingChen asked, surprised.

“Not exactly.” Lan JingYi said. “But if you’d join us for tea, we could explain further.”

“I am not sure how I may be of help.” He said, looking at the road again, then sighed. “But I’d be honored to consul such polite Young Masters.” He said in the end with a smile. Lan JingYi beamed and Lan SiZhui smiled fondly at his friend. He remembered how troubled he was when he learned about A-Qing’s story in Coffin Town, and Lan SiZhui had to admit, he himself was incredibly glad to see Xiao XingChen well and alive.

They returned to the inn with apologies to the waiter about the ruckus they’ve caused, then they cleaned up the table the best they could. Lan JingYi served them all tea, which Xiao XingChen accepted with a kind smile.

“Master Xiao, have you ever heard of the ancient artefact called Yin Iron?” Lan JingYi asked, once they were finished with polite conversation.

“I haven’t.” He shook his head.

“It is a dangerous tool that can control resentful energy. We fear it might’ve fallen into the wrong hands and is going to be used to cause harm to the world.” Lan SiZhui explained. “Our mission is to find the shards it had been broken into. We have gone to the Burial Mounds here in YiLing to learn more about it.”

“You’ve been to the Burial Mounds?” Xiao XingChen blinked at him, surprised. The three teens nodded. “And you’ve come out unscratched.” He studied them.

“Not exactly, but we’re not dead anyways.” Jin Ling said arrogantly.

“Young Masters, that is quite the feat.” He said, sounding impressed. “Now I am even less sure I could be of any help.”

“When we went to the Burial Mounds, Lan SiZhui performed a musical cultivation technique unique to the Lan Sect of Gusu. It is called *Inquiry*, and it uses the Qin language to communicate with the spirits. We have asked the spirits of the Burial Mounds after the Yin Iron.” Lan JingYi explained.

“That’s why I thought you might be able to help us.” Jin Ling said. “The spirit said no mortal possesses the knowledge of where these shards had been hidden in the world. It said they are hidden where the good energy is most powerful. We have already discovered one of these places, the Xiawu Mountain in Gusu.”

“It is a natural healing place for the Lan Sect. The Mountain sits upon a knot of positive natural energy.” Lan SiZhui explained. “I suspect the other shards are hidden in such places as well.”

“The problem is, we don’t know of any other places like that. We also suspect the shards are protected by immortal beings that can suppress its resentful energy.” Jin Ling said.

“And how may I be able to help you in your search?”

“Master Xiao is a rogue cultivator, is he not?” Jin Ling asked. At his nod, he continued. “So Master Xiao must have traveled the world far and wide. Can Master Xiao think of any place

he might've visited on his journey that could fit this description?"

Xiao XingChen seemed to fall into thought. He pressed his lips together and then looked up.

"There are a few places I can think of, but I am unsure they would hold such a thing as this Yin Iron you speak of." He paused. "Can I ask, who do you think has taken hold of this artefact?"

"Mm." Lan SiZhui looked down. "We suspect a powerful cultivator is possessing them in order to gain power for himself. I am afraid if we do not stop him, he will bring disasters to the cultivation world."

"I see." Xiao XingChen paused. "Young Masters. I do not mean to be insensitive, but I belong to no Sect or Clan. I have no interest in bloodlines. Therefore... I'm afraid I do not wish to associate with matters that concern the cultivation world."

"You—!" Jin Ling glared, but at Lan SiZhui's look, he repressed whatever he wanted to say.

"Master Xiao." Lan JingYi started quietly. "I understand. When my parents died, I made a vow to not let people suffer, just because it was inconvenient to me. I have vowed that if I was able to help, no matter what it meant to my own life, I would. So, even though it is unfair of us to ask you, I am still asking you. Because you may come to resent me, us, for asking you to betray your own standards, we need your help to help innocents."

Xiao XingChen was quiet for a long time, then he finished his tea and took a deep breath. "I admire the vow you made. And I suspect the three of you are not acting in the names of your Sects, for you would not be here alone, a Jin disciple and two Lan disciples like good friends. This tells me whatever you are doing you are not doing it to help your Sects, but because this is what you think is right." He paused. "There is a place in the QishanWen Sect's territory, that is protected by an immortal goddess. It is on the mountain Dafan, which sits on a naturally strong positive spiritual outlet."

The three teens shared a wide-eyed look. Dafan Mountain!

"The Dancing Fairy Statue?" Jin Ling leaned closer to Lan SiZhui. He nodded.

"It makes sense. It had snatched souls in the past, which is something we know the Yin Iron is capable of."

"Not in the past." Lan JingYi corrected. "It did not snatch souls at this time, or we do not know about it. So, if it's there, it had either never been disturbed, or it had been put there after the war."

"Who would put it there later?" Jin Ling frowned. "But that makes sense. There was one shard in the Cold Pond Cave, one in the Burial Mounds. With the one already in Wen RuoHan's possession, that is the three shards he had collected. So, the fourth one must be in the Temple of the Dancing Fairy, never disturbed or discovered."

“Yes.” Lan JingYi nodded, grabbing his sword. “I’ll pack up. We must depart immediately before Wen RuoHan suspects it.” With that, he left the table. Xiao XingChen blinked after him. Lan SiZhui turned to him with an apologetic smile.

“Master Xiao, thank you for the help.” Xiao XingChen nodded with a smile of his own.

“Where are you going now? Not towards Shudong, are you?” Jin Ling asked, narrowing his eyes. Xiao XingChen smiled at him confused.

“Actually, I am also going towards Qishan. I have some business in Yueyang that needs to be taken care of.”

“Here we go.” Lan JingYi appeared, handing a bag over to Jin Ling. “Young Mistress, Lan SiZhui.” He handed one to Lan SiZhui as well, but before he could take it, he tightened his hold on it. “Are you sure you’re well enough to travel?”

“I am fine. My spiritual energy is fully restored. I can even take Jin Ling on my sword.”

“Alright.” He handed over the bag, then swung his own over his shoulder. He looked towards Xiao XingChen with a sad expression. “It is goodbye then, isn’t it?”

“We have our own missions.” Xiao XingChen answered kindly. “I’m in a hurry, so I can’t accompany you to Dafan Mountain. Young Masters. I am truly honored to have met you and got to know you. I wish success on your mission and hope that you will be safe, whatever happens on your journey.”

“Safe travels and good hunts, Master Xiao.” The teens returned and then Xiao XingChen walked away. After they took care of their financials, the boys also took off towards Dafan Mountain.



“I hate this place.” Jin Ling scoffed as they entered the mountains. They arrived late at night the previous day and camped around the forest, then set off in the morning. Now they were headed up the familiar path that took them to the Dancing Fairy’s statue.

“Yeah.” Lan JingYi frowned at the surrounding forest as well. “Do you think we will find it?”

“I hope so, since we came all this way. If we don’t, I don’t know what we will do.” Jin Ling sighed. They continued their way up the mountain to a familiar path that led to TianNu Temple. They passed where Wei WuXian first started playing on a makeshift flute in the future, then soon they neared the temple.

It had its doors open and many candles were lit inside. Unlike the last time the three of them had been there in the future, it wasn’t as dirty, abandoned and neglected. It was obvious from fresh incense burners that it got frequent visitors.

Around the statue wet paint glimmered in the candlelight. As they edged closer, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi with their hands tight on their weapons, Lan SiZhui recognized the array around the statue: it was an evil suppressing array. Quite strong as well.

“So, where it is?” Jin Ling asked, looking around. “Do any of you feel something?”

“No, but this paint is fresh. It can’t be older than a few days.” Lan SiZhui noted as he stepped closer. He looked up at the statue.

“Should we try some spells or something?” Lan JingYi suggested.

“Yeah, maybe it’s hidden like the Cold Pont Cave had been.” Jin Ling agreed.

“No.” Lan SiZhui said, narrowing his eyes as he looked up at the statue. He unsheathed Yingjiu and hopped on.

“Lan SiZhui, what are you doing?! Are you getting into its face on purpose?!” Jin Ling hissed, alarmed, drawing an arrow and aiming at the head of the statue.

“No, it’s not alive.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. He flew even closer and let his spiritual energy examine the statue’s. “It’s dormant for now, the array is holding.” He said, then turned his attention to the spot he thought he’d seen from the ground. As he felt it out, he was hit by a sudden wave of resentful energy, and he almost jerked back when the statue moved. He remembered he was on a sword in time and distanced himself from the creature.

“Hey! You said it was dormant!” Jin Ling cried out.

“It is!” Lan SiZhui quickly landed next to them. “I poked at a sore spot. Look.” He nodded towards the statue, which, after the momentary shift, returned to its frozen state.

“What the hell?!” Jin Ling rounded on him after a few seconds. “Don’t do that again!”

“Sorry. I had a suspicion and I needed to confirm it.”

“Did you succeed? What was it? Is the shard here?” Lan JingYi asked eagerly.

“It was.” Lan SiZhui sighed, troubled. “But long ago.”

“Don’t tell me we missed it again!” Jin Ling groaned, frustrated.

“There’s a hollowness to the statue, where it used to protect the Yin Iron. It had been taken.”

“This ward array had also been broken.” Lan JingYi pointed out, kneeling on the ground, running his fingers over a damaged array in front of the statue.

“That was a seal a great Sect placed on the Fairy.” Came an unexpected, unfamiliar voice from behind them. The three teens spun around to face the old man. He wore simple, ragged robes, and there were chains wrapped all around him.

“Uh, excuse our intrusion, sir.” Lan JingYi stood and bowed, the others following suit. “I am Lan JingYi from the Lan Sect, these are my friends, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling.”

“I am Huan Wong.” The old man answered.

“Sir, what do you know about the statue?”

“Mn.” He hummed as he came closer, the chains heavy on his shoulders.

“Ah, let us help, sir.” Lan SiZhui hurried forward and Jin Ling and him helped the chains off the man. With a relieved sigh, he nodded.

“The statue was once a heavenly goddess. Long years ago, it had started terrorizing the surrounding area. The place had not been the same ever since. A great Sect came once and sealed it, but a few weeks ago it started acting out again.”

“What does it do?”

“It attacked anyone who came too close. We lost many to the statue and horrible luck clouded our towns.”

“Aren’t you afraid to come here then?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Mn. I was.” He nodded. “But a few days ago, three Young Masters came by... What was their name... Ah, they said they’re from the Nie Sect.” The three of them shared a look. “But you three are much more polite than they’ve been.” The old man chuckled weakly, then started coughing.

“Sir, sir, are you alright?” Lan JingYi hurried over to him, helping him sit down.

“Thank you. I’m old, Young Masters. The Nie cultivators left us with the instructions to draw that array around the statue and chain it up like it had been before she snapped them.”

“We’ll do it.” Jin Ling offered, picking up one of the chains. “Lan SiZhui?” He nodded at the question and together, they replaced old, rusty chains with the new ones. The statue didn’t even twitch. Once they were done, they returned to Lan JingYi and the old man.

“Ah, many thanks, Young Masters.” The old man bowed to them and they returned it.

“So, sir, other than the Nie disciples, have anyone been by?” Lan JingYi asked in a thoughtful voice.

“There had been... others.” The old man nodded. “There is a branch of a great Sect living here... what was their name...” He thought for a moment. “Ah, right, the young Wen Qing is the daughter of the branch’s leader.”

“Wen Qing had been here?” The three of them shared a look.

“So, then, Wen Qing was the one to snatch the Yin Iron from the statue?” Lan JingYi asked.

“Ah, that’s right!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “Remember, when Lan SiZhui was looking for the Cold Pond Cave at the Floating Lakes, she was also there. She must’ve been looking for the shard there herself as well! She must’ve been the one to get that shard back there.”

“I don’t think it was.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “If the shard was in the Cold Pont Cave, how did she get inside?”

“That’s true...” Jin Ling made a displeased face.

“Ah, anyone else you remember besides the Nie disciples and Wen Qing?” Lan JingYi asked Huan Wong, who slowly shook his head, then held up a hand.

“Ah, Wen Qing arrived with her Young Master. They were here together.”

“Young Master Wen?” They shared another look. “Wen Chao?”

“Young Masters, Young Masters, I cannot possibly remember all the names. I already forgot yours.” He shook his head with a scolding tone. “Many thanks for your help though. I am needed elsewhere. I advise you not to stay here for long.” He warned them, as he turned to shuffle out of the temple. The three of them bowed to his back.

“Great.” Jin Ling huffed as he kicked a piece of rock away. “We have failed. Again.” He paused, looking over at the statue. “Wen Chao is slimy.”

“Something bothers me about this.” Lan SiZhui said thoughtfully. “The old man said the statue started misbehaving a few weeks ago.”

“And?” Jin Ling prompted when he didn’t continue.

“Didn’t the Lan Lectures only end a week or so ago?”

“So, then Wen Qing couldn’t have come by to steal the Yin Iron.” Lan JingYi finished the thought.

“You forget something.” Jin Ling said. “We left early. Who says Wen Qing didn’t leave early as well?”

“That’s true.” Lan JingYi agreed.

“I still feel like something doesn’t add up.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“I agree. Let’s think.” Lan JingYi sat heavily, placing Zhameng over his lap. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui followed his example.

“Master Wei’s shard was supposed to be in the Burial Mounds.” Lan SiZhui said slowly. “But it is somehow missing. Is there a chance it wasn’t there to begin with?” He looked over at his friends. They looked at him questioningly. “What if Wei WuXian didn’t find the shard in the Burial Mounds? The location doesn’t fit anyways, it is not a place filled with good energy.”

“Are you saying Wei WuXian has one of the pieces we’ve missed?”

“No, I don’t think he does.” He shook his head. “Or else it would’ve been noticed by Jiang WanYin and him becoming the YiLing Patriarch had no signs before it actually happened.”

“Except his questions during the lectures.” Jin Ling noted. “We didn’t think he’d been thinking about controlling resentful energy before becoming the YiLing Patriarch either. So, isn’t it possible he had the Yin Iron before as well?”

“I still think it would’ve been too notable. Every story I heard of him described him as a righteous cultivator before turning into the YiLing Patriarch. In that case, there’s still a piece we’re missing.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“I think you might be right.” Lan JingYi agreed. “Let’s collect what we know so far. The shard from the Cold Pond Cave is missing. It is possible that when Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi went missing after their punishment, they found it.”

“What makes you say that?” Jin Ling frowned. “Surely if that was the case, we would’ve heard of it.”

“Think about when the wards deactivated around the Cold Pond Cave.” Lan SiZhui joined Lan JingYi’s thought. “Wasn’t it around the time Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had been found?”

“Okay, that’s possible. It would explain how it went missing.” Jin Ling nodded. “So, that must be the one piece he took with him to the Burial Mounds.”

“Again, there was no signs of Wei WuXian possessing a piece until he fell into the Burial Mounds.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Let’s say it wasn’t the one he created the Stygian Tiger Amulet from.” Lan JingYi chimed in. “So, there is one with Lan WangJi, probably still in the Cloud Recesses. There is one with Wen RuoHan he uses to find the other shards.”

“It must be the one from here!” Jin Ling exclaimed.

“Then how did he know there was one in the Cloud Recesses to begin with? How did he know to send Wen Qing there?” Lan JingYi pointed out and shook his head. “I think that’s a different piece. Something he had before.”

“How could he possess a piece already? They’re hidden and nobody talked about them before the war.” Jin Ling countered.

“If we think about the locations...” Lan JingYi rubbed his chin, like they saw Wei WuXian do so many times before. “There is a pattern other than being in places with positive energy and immortals.”

“What is it?” Jin Ling asked. “Out with it already!”

“The Lan Sect had a shard.”

“And?”

“And, what if this is it? There must be one shard per Sect! Remember what the spirit said. The five Sects hid the shards. So, there must be five shards, one with each Sect!”



“Okay, so we know where the Lan Sect’s was.” Jin Ling nodded. “You think Wen RuoHan has his piece from where the Wen Sect hid theirs?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s here.” He gestured around. “The Dafan Mountain is on the Wen Sect’s territory.”

“But the old man said Wen Chao had been by only a few weeks ago.”

“That doesn’t mean that was when he stole the Yin Iron.” Lan SiZhui said.

“Wait, did the old man say Wen Chao and Wen Qing were here a few weeks ago?” Jin Ling raised his eyebrows. That made the two Lan disciples think, until they concluded that no, they just assumed, since the statue started acting out a few weeks ago, she must’ve been released so the Wen could get the Yin Iron. “And did he say how long ago the Wen Sect sealed the statue? He said long years ago. So, if they sealed it after Wen RuoHan took the shard, then he could have possessed the piece by the time the Lan Guest Lectures went underway.”

“As I said before, Young Mistress, your thinking had improved a lot since you know us!” Lan JingYi grinned.

“Shut up! I’m just pointing out the obvious.”

“So, Wen RuoHan got the shard before the lectures even started.” Lan SiZhui said. “That makes two shards accounted for. Where would the other two be?”

“How about this, how about we go to Qinghe and ask Nie HuaiSang?” Lan JingYi suggested. “He might be able to help and he would, unlike Jin ZiXuan.”

“Hey!”

“I’m just saying!” Lan JingYi argued.

“Didn’t the old man say Nie disciples had been by here?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“It is curious.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Maybe Nie HuaiSang is also looking for the shards?”

“Nie HuaiSang? Figuring out the Yin Iron and its connection to the Wen Sect?” Jin Ling looked at Lan JingYi like he just said the stupidest thing ever.

“Who knows? Besides, if he did, then maybe we could look for the shards together.” Lan JingYi grinned.

“With that clown? Please!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui warned.

“What? He’s not even here to take offense!”

“Nor is he here to defend himself.” Lan SiZhui looked at him sharply. “However, I agree with Lan JingYi’s plan. Jin ZiXuan might not help if we were to ask him, but Nie HuaiSang is much less careful.”

“Fine.” Jin Ling huffed, standing and dusting himself off. “Let’s go then. I can’t stand this place anymore.”

## Persistence II.

They arrived to the Unclean Realm almost a week later. Qinghe was quiet, the tall, proud buildings in a hush, as if the city was preparing for something bad. Lan SiZhui supposed the Wen had already started preparing to take over the world and its threat hung over everyone. Still, Qinghe was beautiful in its own way.

It was probably the most similar to Gusu's inner circles, the streets, made of grey stones of the mountains wide and many vendors around to sell their goods. The buildings looked sturdy as well, nothing delicate about the Nie Sect's home.

Unclean Realm was just like that, a short walk away from the city, its tall stone walls looming over every visitor, promising strong defense of the Sect's disciples. The outer ring, the first line of defense, that separated the buildings from the outer walls, gave the illusion of giants having built it for their own sizes. Once they were let in, the main buildings were just as tall and sturdy as in Qinghe.

The courtyard was busy with disciples training and so they were asked to wait outside the main halls. There was a wall sheltering the main buildings as well, and Lan SiZhui wondered if Qinghe was always ready to fight. No wonder, according to the history books, that when the Wen attacked, Unclean Realm had stood its ground and stood as the fort it was, not a single disciple killed.

After a few minutes of them waiting, Nie MingJue walked out, but on his side was... Lan WangJi?! The three teens shared a confused look, then bowed deeply once Nie MingJue stopped in front of them, Lan WangJi at his elbow.

"Sect Leader Nie, Second Young Master Lan." They chorused.

"Boys, what should I make of this visit? I have just received WangJi and his friends as my guests a day ago and here you are, even more Lan disciples with a Jin disciple." Nie MingJue said with furrowed brows. "Are you here to take WangJi home?"

"Take him home, Sect Leader?" Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a confused look.

"So, he can talk with his brother about the Wen Sect's Indoctrination."

"The Indoctrination?" Lan JingYi cried, alarmed. "Already?!" At Lan WangJi's stern look, he stepped back in line with the other two. "I mean, how much do we have until it starts?"

"Weeks, barely." Nie MingJue frowned. "You haven't heard? The Wen Sect had sent people to all major Sects to enforce their cooperation." The three teens shared a look, and in that moment, they all thought the same thing: Cloud Recesses was in danger. If the Wen Sect sent people to Cloud Recesses now, that meant the attack again would be coming soon.

"You have to go home." Jin Ling turned to his friends, eyes wide. Lan JingYi nodded. Lan SiZhui hesitated. It wasn't like he didn't want to go and help, but should they really meddle

this much? It was one thing to look for the Yin Iron shard, but to actively participate in battle...

“What about you?” Lan JingYi asked Jin Ling.

“Well, I’m coming with you, of course!”

“You can’t.”

“Like Hell I can’t. I can and I will. Watch me!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Well, do you really think the Lan Sect would welcome you now? And how would it look if you came to Gusu instead of Lanling?” Jin Ling swallowed thickly, but didn’t argue back.

Lan SiZhui still wasn’t convinced this was a good idea, but he supposed Lan JingYi was right. How would it look if they didn’t go? How could they reason they weren’t there when their Sect needed them the most? This also gave him a sense of comfort, much like when he was forced to chose to help or not help Lan JingYi and Jin Ling in their quest to change the past. It was easier to go along if he had no choice, the decision had been taken from him and he could freely admit he did want to help.

“Lan SiZhui?” Lan JingYi raised his eyebrows at him challengingly, braced to argue against him if he was to say they shouldn’t participate in the battle.

“We should depart as soon as possible. We don’t know if Wen Xu is already at Cloud Recesses or not.” He said with a nod.

“So, you agree?” Jin Ling seemed surprised. Lan SiZhui didn’t take offense, just smiled at him.

“As Lan JingYi said, we should all stand with our Sects in this time.” He said simply.

“Uh, good!” Jin Ling stuttered out in surprise and nodded, his arms crossed over his chest. “It’s about time you finally see reason!”

“It is decided then.” Nie MingJue said. “WangJi was going to depart tonight, but I think it best if the three of you spend the night then depart to Gusu tomorrow morning.”

“Why should we wait?” Lan JingYi asked, stepping forward. “We should go as soon as possible. We can’t delay.” At that, Lan WangJi and Nie MingJue shared a look. “I mean, if Second Young Master Lan planned on departing tonight, then we don’t want to alter his plans.”

“WangJi?” Nie MingJue turned to the other questioningly. Hanguang-Jun watched them searchingly, contemplating.

“Second Young Master Lan?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“We will depart tonight.” He looked down and said quietly. Then he turned and without waiting for Nie MingJue, headed back to the Nie reception hall.

“I’ll arrange a room for the three of you.” Nie MingJue said, then called over a servant to help them out.



“Are you sure I can’t go with you?” Jin Ling asked once they were placed in a temporary room with some food and tea prepared for them.

“Jin Ling, at this time, the Lan Sect would not want a guest disciple there.” Lan SiZhui said with a shake of his head. “Grandmaster is going to send you away anyways. There’s no point in you coming back to Gusu with us.”

“I could wait in front of the gates.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“It would be suspicious if you didn’t return to Lanling.” Lan JingYi said. “What would your father think?”

“Don’t drag my father into this.” Jin Ling glared.

“It’s best if you return to Lanling still.” Lan SiZhui insisted.

“Wouldn’t that be like sitting on my hands while you two fight?” Jin Ling frowned. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look.

“How about this, how about you continue our search?” Lan JingYi said. “That way, you’re still helpful for us, huh?”

“You’re just trying to occupy me!” Jin Ling raised his nose. Lan JingYi didn’t hide his grin.

“Ah, Young Mistress, you truly improved your skills since night-hunting with us.”

“Who improved?! I’ll break your legs!” Jin Ling glared at him and Lan JingYi let out a delightful laugh.



A few hours later it was finally time to go. A servant came to tell them Nie MingJue was expecting them at the gates in a few minutes, so Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui prepared to depart. Jin Ling watched them from the side, biting his lips in anxiety.

“This is it, right?” He asked once they were finished. “The Wen Sect is attacking.”

“I guess.” Lan JingYi hummed.

“I should be going with you.” Jin Ling said after a pause. “I can really help. Maybe they won’t notice I’m there.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui gave him a look and he groaned, throwing up his hands.

“Why do you get to go and why do I only get to do nothing?!”

“You won’t be doing nothing. You’ll keep looking for the Yin iron shards. That’s important.”

“Fine.” Jin Ling huffed after a pause, looking away and crossing his arms over his chest. “Well, why are we still standing around here?” He asked then. “You have a home to defend and I have shards to look for.”

“Remember to ask Nie HuaiSang first.” Lan JingYi said as they opened the door. “And try not to get killed. Remember, you don’t have a sword anymore.”

“You don’t need to remind me of that!” Jin Ling glared at him.

“Right. We really should go.” Lan SiZhui said, looking over his shoulder. Then they stepped out of the room, Jin Ling watching then from the room. The two Lan disciples bowed to him.

“Keep safe and we’ll see you soon, Young Mistress.”

“I hope so! Don’t die.” Jin Ling told them and bowed as well.

“Boys.” Someone said from behind them and as they turned, they saw Hanguang-Jun waiting for them.

“Right.” Jin Ling pressed his lips together. “Safe travels.” Hanguang-Jun inclined his head in acknowledgement, then he led the two Lan disciples away from the living quarters.

At the gates, Nie MingJue was waiting for them with a few guards.

“WangJi.” He greeted. “Have a safe journey. These guards will accompany you until you leave our territory.”

“Thank you.” Hanguang-Jun bowed to Nie MingJue and the Lan disciples did the same.

They mounted their swords and set off.



The guards left them two days later when they neared the borders. Another three days later they entered the GusuLan Sect’s territory. A day later they arrived to Moling.

Lan SiZhui had been to the city numerous times. He had been Lan JingYi’s friend for more than ten years, so they visited plenty of time. It was a bit different than Gusu or Caiyi – while those two cities had a river going through them, Moling only had a few lakes surrounding it. The city walls were always open and white-clothed cultivators were not a rare sight either, being the Lan Sect’s familial branch, the Su Clan wore similar robes, except the headband, and many Lan disciples lived there as well.

As they walked down familiar streets, Lan SiZhui recognized many buildings, and some people as well – there were some shop owners who only got older, but not left during the war. There was Madam Ku, the lady who used to give them sweets when they were young, or Master Su BaFeng, who made guqin for the Lan disciples.

Lan SiZhui wondered if they were going to meet Lan JingYi's parents.

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi stopped to grip Lan SiZhui's arm. At his exclamation, even Hanguang-Jun halted. "Remember the girl I told you I wanted to marry as a kid in DengLong Palace?" He asked excitedly. Lan SiZhui smiled, amused and nodded. "We're the same age now. I want to see her!"

Lan SiZhui remembered when Lan JingYi first arrived to Cloud Recesses, he would tell stories of his hometown. He was smitten with a girl he grew up with, whose name Lan SiZhui had long forgotten. When Lan JingYi was telling him about her, he said she was much older than him, and she used to look after him when his parents went on night-hunts.

Lan SiZhui hesitated. While he was excited to see her and others they used to know in their time, they had a mission and didn't have time for things like that. Besides...

"Don't you want to see your parents?" They were headed to the Su Clan's residence in Moling, a manor with multiple buildings separated by walls inside the city. If Lan ChenGuang and Su ZhuoXuan really just married, they shouldn't have settled yet for a home and they should still be disciples to the Su Clan, living with them as well.

Lan JingYi pressed his lips together and looked away. "It's not like they know me here." He said quietly. "Please? Just a glimpse inside." He looked over at Hanguang-Jun, who was waiting for them patiently down the street. "Han—Second Young Master Lan, you don't mind if we go inside to say hi to some old friends, do you?" Hanguang-Jun furrowed his brows and stepped closer. He looked up at DengLong Palace with a puzzled expression.

"You want to stay at an inn?"

"Not stay!" Lan JingYi denied. "Just have a meal perhaps? We can meet in Su Manor later." Hanguang-Jun looked over at them, studying them sternly.

"Mn." And then he walked inside DengLong Palace. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look, then followed him inside.

"Welcome, friends." A girl a few years younger than them greeted, bowing deeply. "Would you like a meal and a room while you stay in Moling?"

"We'd certainly like a meal!" Lan JingYi said excitedly. Lan SiZhui smiled at him. "Ah, but I'm afraid we don't have enough—"

"Dinner for three and two rooms, please." Hanguang-Jun said unexpectedly.

"Ah, Second Young Master Lan, I thought you wanted to spend the night in Su Manor." Lan JingYi said, puzzled.

"It does not matter where we stay for the night." Hanguang-Jun answered simply, then followed the girl when she led them to two tables near each other. Being lower in rank than Hanguang-Jun, the boys didn't feel like it was proper to sit with him, so they settled at the table right next to the one Hanguang-Jun choose. This wasn't anything new to the two, but

Hanguang-Jun sent them a confused look before he settled and ordered some food and tea, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi doing the same.

“Lan JingYi, have you been here a lot?” Lan SiZhui asked as they waited for their food.

“Mn. It is where I spent a lot of my time when my parents went on night-hunts. The old lady is Madam Xin. She is generous but truly noisy.” He chuckled, as if on his command, the lady yelled something to one of the girls. “The girls are her daughters, Han Qing, Han Jun, Han Lu, Han Yu and Han Yue.”

“She has five daughters?” Lan SiZhui looked around at the girls serving food and drinks.

“She wanted a boy, so she and her late husband had decided to have as many children as it took. By the time her fifth, Han Yue was born, her husband had died. Only the oldest has a husband yet, the others are still single. I remember I used to want to marry Han Yu.”

“Which one is she?” Maybe Lan SiZhui spent too much time with other Sect’s disciples, for being so careless to gossip.

“The one with the dimples and pinned up hair. She has the sweetest smile.” Lan JingYi grinned. Lan SiZhui found her with his eyes. She wasn’t their waiter, but she was also young. Almost their age, maybe a bit younger.

“I see now, why you were so in love with her.” Lan SiZhui smiled.

“Right? But I didn’t stand a chance back then. I was just a kid and she was already ready to marry.”

Soon, their food arrived and they ate in relative silence, as to adhere the rules in Hanguang-Jun’s presence. Once the food was gone, they were served tea. As they sipped it, Lan SiZhui asked:

“Why don’t you want to see your parents? I thought you’d be excited to spend time with them again.”

“As I said, they don’t know me.” Lan JingYi said with a sour expression. “I know you understand, since...” He trailed off and glanced over at Hanguang-Jun, then back onto his cup. “The conversation I’d want to have with them is one I’d have with the parents I grew up with. Mother is not even pregnant yet.”

“What would you say to them?” Lan SiZhui pried gently. While he always had to be careful what he asked Jin Ling, he knew Lan JingYi for half his life. At this point they knew each other well. Lan JingYi was generally an open person. There were very few things he disliked to talk about. If Lan SiZhui ever asked him something that made the other uncomfortable, he didn’t worry about Lan JingYi causing a scene, but simply tell him he didn’t want to answer.

“Probably... ‘I’m sorry’.” He smiled sadly. “And probably tell them that I listened to them. To their teachings and advices. And that I’m better now and I have a good place. A good



family.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui brightly. “What would you say to your parents? If you ever met them?”

“Hm.” Lan SiZhui thought about that for a moment, then shook his head and shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“We could find them, hm?” Lan JingYi got a mischievous look in his eye, like that time he figured climbing on apple trees to pick the nicest apples was a good idea and Lan SiZhui fell and broke his arm. Or when he showed up in the middle of the night with Jin Ling and a strange book and figured it was a good idea to spend time together by playing music and chatting, but then they found themselves in the past.

“I’m not even sure where we would start.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “And we’re already messing with enough things, don’t you think?”

“I refuse to believe you really just want to sit and see what happens.” Lan JingYi watched him searchingly. “I get that you’re trying to be righteous, but it can’t be what you truly want.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, looking down.

“Boys.” The unexpected voice of Hanguang-Jun came from beside them and they looked over, seeing him standing. “I’m going to retire for the night. Let us meet out front as soon as you wake.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were quick to stand and bow to him. They waited until Hanguang-Jun disappeared up the stairs, then sat to talk some more, this time lighter topics of old days, fond memories of their childhood.

The next morning, they departed as soon as they were awake. The sun wasn’t even up yet and there was only the night-staff awake in the dining area. They didn’t try to get them to stay like the day staff would have, just accepted payment, and wished them a safe journey. If everything went well, they’d arrive to Gusu before noon.



They were late. Even though they’ve rushed as fast as they could, as soon as they arrived at the foot of the mountain they knew they were late. The wards were broken, this, they could all feel from even down there. They rushed up the mountain as fast as they could. The guards at the gates were dead. Lan SiZhui took their pulse desperately, but found nothing.

“Let’s go.” Lan WangJi said harshly.

“But...” Lan SiZhui started.

“We cannot help the dead. We can help the living.” The words were harsh and unforgiving, even if true. But his father had always been a reassuring presence and Lan SiZhui took comfort even in his coldness.

He swallowed and nodded, joining their mad rush up the mountain. Halfway up they’ve met some Wen soldiers. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui unsheathed their swords, but before they

could fight, Lan WangJi sent some spiritual energy ahead of them, knocking them off their feet.

“No time to fight here. We must get to the main buildings.” They nodded at his command and continued their way up. There was a great battle in front of the main walls. The disciples were desperately keeping the Wen soldiers outside and they seemed to be succeeding so far. Before Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi could join the fight, Hanguang-Jun stopped them once again.

“We must find my brother and the Grandmaster.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” The boys nodded. They passed over the wall unnoticed. The fight just started to break into the courtyard. The three of them rushed towards the Lanshi, when Lan SiZhui noticed a familiar form running towards the Library Pavilion.

“Second Young Master Lan, ZeWu-Jun!”

Hanguang-Jun ran ahead of them towards the Library Pavilion. As they entered, they heard someone trashing the Forbidden Room. The door was wide open. They rushed downstairs. As soon as they got to the bottom of the stairs, Lan XiChen turned, his sword unsheathed.

“Brother!” Lan WangJi cried.

“WangJi!” He looked at his brother wide-eyed, sheathing Shuoyue. “What are you doing here?!”

“We came as fast as we could, I—”

“WangJi, come, come with me!” He said urgently, shoving a bag full of books in his hands as he reached for another. “We must leave, Grandmaster—”

“Where is Uncle?”

“He decided to stay.” ZeWu-Jun set his jaw, his face pinched tight. The only time Lan SiZhui had seen him like this had been at the Temple with Jin GuangYao. “We must leave.”

“I can’t let our brothers die, I—”

“Grandmaster will take them to the Cold Pond Cave you’ve found.” Lan XiChen said, pushing another bag into Lan JingYi’s hand as he started packing yet another one.

“ZeWu-Jun...”

“We must go.” He kept saying.

“Brother I can’t.” Lan WangJi looked heartbroken. “Please, don’t ask me to.”

“WangJi. If I have to knock you out and drag your unconscious body out of here, I swear I’ll do it.” Lan XiChen turned his icy glare at his brother, who kept shaking his head.

“Let’s get out of here.” Lan JingYi said as he looked up, where the noises of fight got closer and closer. They all agreed and rushed out of the building and over the outer walls. They ran towards the back mountains, towards Wuye’s dangerous rock formations, hoping it will help them escape. Before they entered the mountain though, Lan SiZhui, then Lan WangJi halted.

They shared a look. They didn’t know each other well in this timeline, but Lan SiZhui was his father’s son. Lan SiZhui saw the same thoughts swirling in his adoptive father’s eyes, knew he was just as conflicted between protecting someone dear to him and duty. He couldn’t let his brothers hurt if he just ran away the same way Lan SiZhui couldn’t let Lan JingYi fight either. He had to be safe, ZeWu-Jun also had to be safe.

But ZeWu-Jun survived this once and Lan SiZhui took comfort in that, as well as used it as an excuse for what he did next. He took the bag ZeWu-Jun gave Hanguang-Jun earlier and tossed it so Lan JingYi had to catch it where him and ZeWu-Jun halted upon noticing their absence. Now both Lan JingYi and Lan XiChen had two bags of precious texts they couldn’t leave, they had to protect.

“What are you two doing?!” Lan XiChen watched them with growing horror in his eyes.

“Lan SiZhui, come on!” Lan JingYi urged, taking a step forward. Lan SiZhui backed away a step.

“Lan JingYi. Do you remember how we met?”

“We don’t have time for this, Lan SiZhui, come on.”

“When your parents died, you weren’t the only one who made a vow. I promised myself no matter what, I won’t let you hurt that badly again.”

“So, come on! Don’t let me watch you die, too!” Lan SiZhui shook his head and took another step back.

“I’m sorry.”

“SiZhui…”

“I cannot bear losing you too.” He said as he raised his hand. Lan WangJi did the same and together, they formed a ward that would protect the entrance of Wuye and stop anyone entering or leaving the Cloud Recesses this way.

“WangJi!”

“SiZhui!”

“I’m sorry.” Lan SiZhui said again.

“Weren’t you the one who said we cannot change history?!” Lan JingYi cried as he hit the barrier. “Weren’t you the one who wanted to stay out of it?! Don’t be a hypocrite, not now! Please!”

“WangJi...”

“Let’s go.” Lan WangJi said quietly and unsheathed his sword.

“SiZhui!”

“Lan JingYi, come on.” Lan XiChen said softly as he took hold of the boy, looking at Lan WangJi with so much heartbreak, Lan SiZhui couldn’t bear to look at him. He unsheathed his sword as well.

“SiZhui, please!”

“Go.” He whispered, following his adoptive father. As they ran through the woods, they could still hear Lan JingYi’s desperate calls and Lan XiChen’s urging him to go, then their voices faded and the battle cries drew closer.

“Now what?” Lan SiZhui asked, and while he hoped it came out confident and maybe a little arrogant, because he wished to mock Wei WuXian, the only person he knew who was stronger than even his adoptive father, he still felt it shake and wobble.

“Now we fight.” Lan WangJi said darkly, and together, they descended in the middle of the battlefield that was once the courtyard of their home.

Lan SiZhui didn’t bother to count how many enemies he’d killed, just as he didn’t bother counting the white-red bodies of his brothers at his feet. He fought for his home and for his brothers, he fought because that was the right thing to do. And perhaps, perhaps now he understood Lan JingYi. Now, he knew why he insisted on changing history as he watched his brothers, these strangers who were only family because of a shared place they called home, fall to their deaths.

He fought hard and desperate. He thought about the fierce corpses he fought in the Burial Mounds and imagined them in the Wen soldiers’ place, or else he couldn’t bear the thought of killing live people. Still, the hot blood on his sword and landing in droplets on his face, arms and chest made him feel dirtier than ever before. The fight was long, brutal and hopeless, but still, he fought because he didn’t know what else he could do.

“Retreat!” Someone cried. “Grandmaster leads us to Xiawu!”

“Cold Pont Cave!” Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi shared a look.

“Go!” Lan WangJi called over his shoulder. “Lan SiZhui, Su Chao, Lan XuanJun stay and hold them back, so the others can escape!”

“Yes!” Sounded from all around them, and while Lan SiZhui doubted the four of them would manage to hold them all that effectively, he fought with even more vigor than before. Then slowly but surely, the difference in numbers started to make itself obvious. When Su Chao fell, Hanguang-Jun stepped back and sheathed Bichen, taking out his guqin. With a swipe of his fingers, spiritual energy sent the enemy back enough that Lan SiZhui and Lan XuanJun could also jump away.

“Retreat!” Hanguang-Jun called to them, so Lan XuanJun and Lan SiZhui mounted their swords. Lan WangJi did the same. For once, the natural defense of the mountains was absent. It was as if the mountains wanted to let them fly on their swords, withholding their fog.

“We’re heading for the Cold Pond Cave. Follow me!” Hanguang-Jun called to them, and the two disciples fell in line obediently. Lan SiZhui looked over at Lan XuanJun. She didn’t look good, but then he supposed he wasn’t in the best condition either. They were covered in blood and soot. Lan XuanJun recently cried as well, the tear tracks obvious on her dirty face.

They arrived just as Wen Xu was attacking. Hanguang-Jun pulled out his guqin and before he could even touch Grandmaster, Wen Xu was thrown back by Lan WangJi’s spiritual energy. Lan SiZhui, Lan WangJi and Lan XuanJun landed ahead of the survivors, many of them sporting injuries, including the Grandmaster. Lan SiZhui sheathed Yingjiu as well and just like his father, pulled out his guqin. The two sides faced each other, Wen Xu’s army against the three of them. There was a tense moment, then Wen Xu snarled and cried out:

“Kill them!” And the battle continued once again.

Hanguang-Jun and Lan SiZhui made sure to take out as many as they could with their guqin, but some still broke through. Lan XuanJun threw herself into the fight like she hadn’t just fought minutes ago in the courtyard, and thankfully some braver disciples joined her.

“Into the Cave! Don’t slack!” Grandmaster called out and the battle line drew closer and closer to the illusion of the stone wall as more and more disciples fell behind and entered. Lan SiZhui intended on fighting until the last of them went inside, but then more and more of his brothers had been disarmed and held at sword point. Someone grabbed his arm from behind, just as he was about to go and help one of them.

“Take shelter and regroup!” Hanguang-Jun said in his ear and dragged him inside the cave. He kept dragging him until Lan SiZhui collapsed against a wall, then let him go and went away. As Lan SiZhui looked up, he saw him support Grandmaster away from the disciples surrounding him and sit him at the guqin platform, where Lan Yi’s pure white guqin still sat. Lan WangJi was still tending to his uncle’s injuries when a voice drifted inside.

“Listen, Lan WangJi! Hand over the Yin Iron shard or I will kill all the disciples in Cloud Recesses.”

Lan SiZhui closed his eyes tightly as the yells and cries of pain started. So, there was a shard in the Cloud Recesses. They didn’t miss it because it wasn’t where they thought it was, but because Lan WangJi found it before them. He opened his eyes and looked towards his adoptive father, who was looking like he was ready to go outside.

From the outside, even more voices drifted in.

“The headband! All the inner disciples are equipped with headbands...” someone cried in terror. Lan SiZhui swallowed. Now, that Wen Xu knew, he could enter any minute now. He could massacre them all. There was no other way out.

“Where is Lan XiChen?” Wen Xu’s question was like the ice-cold water of the cave on Lan SiZhui’s back. ZeWu-Jun! Lan JingYi!

“He has escaped with the ancient books.”

Him and Lan WangJi moved at the same moment. At Grandmaster’s voice, Lan WangJi halted, but with their focus on him, Lan SiZhui could slip out unnoticed.

Once he was nearing the entrance, Lan WangJi caught up with him and gripped his shoulder. “Stay.”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and shook his head, stepping in front of his adoptive father.

“I can lead them astray. Tell them the Yin Iron is somewhere else.”

“They wouldn’t believe you.”

“Then I’ll fight them as long as I can.”

“Suicide.”

“Second Young Master Lan, if you go out there, they won’t spare you either.”

“I have leverage. I’ll be alive.” Lan SiZhui fought tears threatening to escape.

“You’ll be hurt.”

“Better than dead.”

“Please don’t let me watch you get hurt as well.” Lan SiZhui whispered.

“I’ll be fine. Stay. Here’s safe.”

“I don’t want to be safe. I want to be by your side.” It sounded like a whine of a child, and that was exactly what Lan SiZhui felt like at that moment. Instead of softening like his adoptive father would’ve done, Lan WangJi’s features grew colder.

“Stay.” He squeezed his shoulder and sensing he was about to press on a pressure point to knock him out, Lan SiZhui twisted out of his grip... right outside, in front of the Wen soldiers. Suddenly, several swords pointed at him. He unsheathed his own weapon, swallowing thickly. Then Lan WangJi stepped in front of him, Bichen also unsheathed.

“Lan WangJi.” Wen Xu smirked. “You finally came out.”

“Let them go. Leave Cloud Recesses.” At that, Wen Xu snorted and gestured to his soldiers. Four of them rushed forward and surrounded the two of them. Lan WangJi turned his head to see Lan SiZhui was alright.

“Where is the Yin Iron shard?”

“Leave Cloud Recesses. I will go to Qishan.”

“How about the boy?” He raised his eyebrows at Lan SiZhui.

“Whatever happens to Second Young Master Lan happens to me too.” Lan SiZhui stated with finality in his voice before Lan WangJi could even utter a word. Wen Xu snorted again. In front of him, Lan WangJi tensed.

“I’ll see to that personally.” He said with an evil smirk. “So be it. Set him free.” He pointed at a cowering Su She. Lan SiZhui frowned at the other man and it was on the tip of his tongue to tell them to let everyone else go except him. It would be unethical, he knew, and he blamed the heat of the battle for his thoughts. Wen Xu seemed ready to leave, but at the last minute, something occurred to him. He turned back. “Boy. You wanted everything that happens to your Second Young Master Lan to happen to you, too, right?” He grinned. “Let’s start that now.” He turned to his soldiers. “Break one of their legs.”

Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened at that, then the next moment sharp pain shot through his left leg, and he saw Hanguang-Jun’s right one being hit as well. They fell to the ground both. Wen Xu laughed darkly. Lan SiZhui had to close his eyes not to throw up at the pain.

“Bring them!” Wen Xu called over his shoulder and both of them had been picked up under their arms and dragged down the mountains. As they crossed the Cloud Recesses, or what it once had been, Lan SiZhui truly felt faint, but he didn’t know why. It could’ve been because of the pain, or the sight of his home burnt to the ground. It could’ve been the smell of burnt wood, paper, and the worst of all, burnt meat. The dead were left where they were, stepped over, kicked aside. Lan SiZhui didn’t let his tears fall.



The journey to Qishan had been... horrible. Lan SiZhui had never felt so bad in his entire life. Hanguang-Jun was stone faced and silent, and he didn’t let Lan SiZhui even take a look at his leg. He was so frustrated by that, as he was about the way they were treated. At night, they were tied to individual trees. They put bowls of food in front of them, but since their hands were bound, they could not eat. It made their captors laugh.

During their travels, when Wen Xu and Wen Chao were with them, they at least handled them like human beings. They were carried on swords and often stopped for breaks, giving them drink and eat regularly. Lan SiZhui remained silent as well, and didn’t let any tears fall.

He often found himself awake, because every time he closed his eyes, ashen faces of his fallen brothers, even if he didn’t know these past disciples all that well, looked back at him. He often found himself unable to swallow food either, mainly because the Wen offered them cooked meat with nothing else, surely another way to mock them, since they knew Lan disciples did not eat meat. The smell made bile rise in his throat. He even threw up once, but he hid it well from even Hanguang-Jun.

And he was cold. It was still barely the end of the summer, the days still pleasantly warm, but Lan SiZhui didn’t seem to be able to feel it. Something chilled him inside and his jaw was constantly sore from clenching his teeth tightly together, stopping them from clattering.

Strangely, the only comfort he'd found those days was from his forehead ribbon. He didn't know why, but he felt like that was the only thing not tainted on him, in him. It was the only pure thing left and he often found himself tipping his head to the side, just so he could see the end of the ribbon in his hair.

Then they reached Qishan and they were put into rooms deep in the Nightless City. They were ordered to bathe, then they were given new cloths. They only had one room, with two beds, at least. The robes were simple, white. They weren't GusuLan robes, just common mourning robes and Lan SiZhui felt amusement rise in his chest at the thought.

It started with a snort, as he stood over the outer robes, inner ones already put on. Then it turned into a breathless chuckle, but Lan SiZhui didn't seem to be able to repress it, and soon, unstoppable laugh bubbled up in his throat until tears welled in his eyes, then—then he was sinking to the floor, hand pressed against his mouth as sobs broke from his chest, tears streaming down his face. And he didn't know what was wrong with him, because he *couldn't stop*.

He sat on the floor in front of his bed in the Nightless City, his worst nightmare coming to life and despite having perfect control over his emotions since he was ten years old, he was sobbing and sobbing and couldn't stop the tears and the pain in the middle of his chest. It burned like he was set on fire, like his home had been. It hurt like his heart was breaking into pieces, literally. It hurt like nothing had ever hurt before and he screamed, he screamed until he was hoarse and it still wasn't enough.

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He didn't remember falling asleep, but the next day he woke in his bed, and his leg was bandaged so tightly it hurt. His clothes from the previous day had been hung neatly on the wall. He reached up, alarmed, but his forehead ribbon was still in place, secure and pure as always. His head hurt as well, so did his throat and his eyes.

He sat up slowly, hissing as pressure changed on the bandages on his leg. He reached down. The bandage wasn't really that, but a strip of the same fabric his inner robes were made of, but his were unharmed. He furrowed his brows as he swung his legs off the bed, facing the privacy screen he'd hid behind from Hanguang-Jun the night before, and with blush creeping into his cheeks he realized his break-down was witnessed by him.

He shivered, cold again, but this time it was more from the breeze that drifted inside the room from somewhere. He stood slowly, noting his leg, despite feeling strangled, didn't hurt as much as before, the bandages surely cutting off blood-flow, making it numb for the pain. He dreaded ever having to rid of the bandages. He stepped out from behind the privacy screen, intending to wash his face, only to freeze.

Hanguang-Jun sat at the low table in the middle of the room. There were two bowls of food on a tray in front of him. As he looked up at Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes in answer, ashamed of the previous day. But Lan WangJi didn't comment on his breakdown, simply said:

“Eat.”



Lan SiZhui hesitated, but then walked slowly over to the table, lowering himself gingerly on the ground across Hanguang-Jun. His food was placed in front of him along with a cup of tea.

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui said quietly, and started eating. He didn’t only mean the food, but he didn’t know if he should make that clear. Instead, he ate. He noticed, surprised, that instead of meat, he got two tofu cubes. Looking over at Lan WangJi’s bowl, his eyes threatened to tear up again as he noticed two pieces of meat. He didn’t comment, because Lan WangJi hadn’t either and kept eating.

They didn’t talk after breakfast either. Hanguang-Jun immediately started to meditate, so after Lan SiZhui got himself together as well, he joined. During the day, they were mostly left alone. A guard was by to take dirty dishes and bring lunch. Then after lunch, another one arrived.

“Second Young Master Lan. Young Master Wen wishes to see you.” He said with feigned politeness. When they both stood, he faced Lan SiZhui. “Only Second Young Master Lan.”

“Whatever happens to him happens to me as well.”

“Lan SiZhui.” Lan WangJi told him warningly.

“That was our deal with Young Master Wen.” Lan SiZhui kept looking at the guard.

“Young Master Wen emphasized that he only wishes to see Second Young Master Lan. He sends reassurances that if anything was to happen to him will happen to you as well.”

“I’m going with.”

“No.” Hanguang-Jun said sternly. “Stay. Heal.”

“But—” Lan SiZhui started, but Hanguang-Jun cut him off.

“Lan SiZhui. Obey.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, but he kept quiet. He watched with a lump in his throat as Hanguang-Jun was led away, but he didn’t move to follow.

They returned an hour later. Lan SiZhui jumped on his feet the moment the door opened. Hanguang-Jun walked in on his own legs, then the door closed.

“Han—Second Young Master Lan. Is everything alright?” Lan SiZhui hurried over.

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun nodded and went over to settle by the table as he had been previously meditating.

“Did they do anything?”

“Just questions.” Lan WangJi said impassively. “Nothing physical. Let us continue.” Lan SiZhui wanted to keep asking, but he knew it wouldn’t be fruitful, so he held back a frustrated sigh and sat, settling in to meditate.



Almost a week went on like this, except Lan SiZhui didn't break down again. It seemed like whatever was keeping him so wound up had come out with his sobs that day, and he didn't feel as cold anymore. His leg was still badly hurt, but even if he untied the bandage for the night, he always woke with it tightly wound around his leg. They spent the day meditating, healing as much as they could, but the poor diet and probably bad break prevented them from healing faster. Hanguang-Jun was taken every afternoon for an hour precisely and he always returned just as he left.

Then one day their routine was changed. They just finished breakfast, ready for their morning meditation, when their door opened and four guards entered along with Wen Chao. He grinned at them where they sat.

"My brother sends his deepest apologies, after all, he'd promised to look after the two of you personally." He said meanly. "He has other matters to attend to, so for the next few weeks, I am in charge of making sure the two of you get the treatment you deserve." He nodded to the guards, who went over and tugged them on their feet. They both shook them off, annoyed. "Let's go." He said and turned.

They were led outside and for a moment the sharp sunlight hurt Lan SiZhui's eyes. Then Wen Chao parted from them and they were led further away from their rooms, every step hurting more and more. In the end, they were led to the courtyard, behind some disciples, and Lan SiZhui's eyes widened as he recognized the different Sects' robes. Nie, Jiang, Jin. No Lan. That was them, he supposed.

"Bring them over!" Wen Chao called from somewhere ahead of them. Lan WangJi shifted, so he was in front of Lan SiZhui, like he was the head disciple leading the underling in front of the Grandmaster. Lan SiZhui felt familiar bile rise in his throat, but he swallowed it as they took their place, head held high.

"Lan Zhan." Someone said from the crowd around them, and he recognized Wei WuXian's voice but it barely registered in the buzzing in his ears. "Lan Zhan." He heard again, once they've stopped.

"Wei WuXian, don't cause any trouble. As long as he is fine, you'll get a chance to ask him about everything. That thing might be in Cold Pond Cave." Jiang WanYin said.

"I know. Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan!"

"Silence. No talking." A guard called out.

"Since you are all here in Qishan, you shall follow Qishan's rules. First and foremost, during the indoctrination, no one is allowed to carry weapons personally in case of disturbing His Excellency. Now let us start. Hand in your swords one by one." Lan SiZhui's grip tightened on Yingjiu, but honestly, he was surprised they hadn't taken away their swords earlier.

"A cultivator stands with his sword, always! There's no way we would surrender our swords. I refuse!" Someone cried out.

“Never before have we heard that we have to surrender our swords. How can the Wen Sect be like this? We refuse.” Someone else said.

“Who spoke? From which Sect? Step out from the crowd.” Wen Chao paused, but no one moved. “It is precisely because of disciples like you, who know nothing about obedience and etiquette, whose cores are totally and utterly rotten, that His Excellency has decided to indoctrinate you. If your manners aren't corrected early on, some of you might attempt to challenge the authority and tread upon the Wen Sect's heads. Confiscate their swords!”

Lan SiZhui heard Wei WuXian and Jiang WanYin whisper amongst themselves, but it was too quiet to make out the words. The guards first took the Jiang disciples' swords. Wei WuXian unsurprisingly did the opposite that everyone expected of him and handed it over easily. Then the guards turned to Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui. When he hesitated, Lan WangJi turned his head slightly. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes and handed over Yingjiu.

“The Jin Sect stands with our swords.” Came from Jin ZiXuan. “If you want our swords, you will have to take us with you.”

“You dare challenge His Excellency?”

“Young Master Wen, we are here to be indoctrinated. Do not push it too far.”

“See what I was talking about? Some of you already have bad intentions. Am I right? Second Young Master Lan...” He paused and everyone looked towards Lan WangJi. “Some of you, and not just the Lan Sect of Gusu, are trying to stage a coup. You are one of the rebels! Soldiers, take him into custody!” At that, Jin ZiXuan grabbed his sword with the intention of drawing it – but before he could, a young lady stopped him.

“Young Master. Please pardon him for this. It is the Jin Sect's precept. Our Young Master has no intention of offending you. I beg for your forgiveness.”

“MianMian, there's no need to beg for forgiveness. There are no cowards in the Jin Sect.” Lan SiZhui felt a pang of longing. Even though he had not raised him, Jin ZiXuan's words sounded something he could easily hear Jin Ling say. Thinking of his friend, Lan SiZhui looked over and scanned the Jin disciples the best he could, but he didn't see Jin Ling. He let out a small sigh of relief at that.

Wen Chao walked over to the Jin Sect, and from where he stood, Lan SiZhui couldn't hear what they were saying before Wen Chao turned and ordered:

“Soldiers, take his sword.” The lady from earlier said something to Jin ZiXuan, but he still wasn't handing over his sword. “Are you going to surrender your sword or not?” Wen Chao barked. After a short pause, Jin ZiXuan did. “I will spare you this time for the sake of the Jin Sect's old leader. But let me be clear, if any of you dare to disobey my orders ever again, I will show no mercy. Here is a book for everyone. *The Quintessence of the Wen Sect*. It is a collection of proverbs and glories from Sect leaders and famed gentries of the Wen Sect. Every one of you needs to memorize each word by heart. I will ask someone to recite every sunrise, midday, and dusk from now on. Those who cannot will be punished according to our Sect's rules.”

“Yes, most definitely!” Wei WuXian called out. “I’m going to take a hard look...” He whispered something to Jiang WanYin.

“Good!” Wen Chao called back. “That is all for now, the guards will show you your rooms.” At his gesture, the four guards were back at the Lan’s back and they were urged back to their rooms while the others broke into a smaller chaos to organize where everyone was being placed.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Lan SiZhui limped to his bed and hissed as he let himself sit gingerly. From standing up, his leg had gone first completely numb, then started throbbing and by the end, it was hurting with such a sharp pain, he could barely stand.

“Let me see.” Lan WangJi said as he kneeled in front of Lan SiZhui.

“Ah, Second Young Master Lan, it’s alright—”

“Lying is forbidden.” He simply said.

“It hurts.” Lan SiZhui said, probably downplaying a little. Hanguang-Jun just nodded and slowly, carefully, started unwrapping it. After a few seconds, he quietly said:

“I apologize. I didn’t realize we’d be standing so much today.”

“You didn’t know.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, then something occurred to him. “How is your leg, Second Young Master Lan?”

“It’s fine.”

“Lying is...” He hissed as the bandage parted from his skin for good. “Lying is forbidden.”

Lan WangJi was quiet for a long moment, letting Lan SiZhui’s robes fall over his leg. “I imagine the same as yours.”

“So, just okay then.” Lan SiZhui tried for a smile and Lan WangJi’s cold expression softened a little as he looked up.

“Lie down. We shouldn’t wrap your leg from now on. It might cause more harm than good.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui sighed as he pushed himself up on the bed, so he was sitting against the headboard. Before Lan WangJi could stand, he added: “Thank you. For caring for it this past few days.”

“I should have cared for you on the way here as well.” He said quietly.

“Everybody copes their own ways, but Second Young Master Lan... You don’t need to appear strong and unfazed on my account. I know you are hurt and worried just as I am.”

“Everybody has their own ways to cope.” Was all he said before he stood and disappeared behind the privacy screen.



“What are you doing?” Hanguang-Jun asked after they were finished with lunch. He settled in to meditate like he did so many times in the past week, but Lan SiZhui didn’t join him this time, cleaning off the table and spreading the *Quintessence of the Wen Sect* on it in order to read.

“Doing the only thing I can do without going crazy.” Lan SiZhui answered truthfully. Hanguang-Jun opened his eyes and looked at him for a long moment before closing them again. Softly, he requested:

“Read it out loud.”

So, Lan SiZhui did.



The moment Wei WuXian started reciting the Lan Sect principles, Lan SiZhui knew they were about to get into serious trouble. Still, he couldn’t be mad at Wei WuXian, even if hearing the words hurt in new ways he’d discovered he could be hurt. He found himself thinking about his home, the only thing he thought would always be there for him. He knew it would be rebuilt, he knew the Sect would survive, but his mind still brought up images he’d rather forget and thoughts he never thought he’d wonder about.

Strangely, the first thing that came to mind had been if the Wall of Disciple was still intact, or if it burnt with the buildings as well? What about the apple trees? What about the bunnies? He swallowed thickly.

After Wen Chao’s order to take them to the vegetable gardens, the four of them were escorted away from the courtyard. Behind them, whispers rose. Wei WuXian was led in the front, then Jin ZiXuan. Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui brought up the rear. In the past week or so, their legs had been healing sluggishly, but they finally reached the point where they could stand. Seeing the path leading up the mountains behind Nightless City, Lan SiZhui suspected that process was about to be undone.

Lan SiZhui worked quietly besides Lan WangJi. Wei WuXian eyed him through narrowed eyes, frowning at him, but otherwise didn’t acknowledge his presence. Then he followed Lan WangJi when the other started down the hill. Lan SiZhui just started after them some distance away, when Wen Chao suddenly appeared. He stopped in his tracks and watched as they talked, but then Wen Chao swung his whip and Lan SiZhui dropped his buckets, running ahead. The guards rearing them stopped him.

As Wei WuXian was restrained, he elbowed one of the guards in the face and twisted out of the others’ grasp. There were cries of alarm and pain behind him as he and Lan WangJi stepped in front of Wei WuXian at the same time, their shoulders bumping into each other. Wen Chao snarled at them.

“You truly wish to share the same fate as Second Young Master Lan, boy.” He glared. “Guards! Restrain them!” They were grabbed from behind, but before Lan SiZhui could even

think about struggling against the hold, a hard, unforgiving boot kicked into the back of his knee – thankfully, the right one – and he buckled forward. He landed wrong though, and he grunted in pain as his broken leg twisted underneath him.

“Wen Chao! I am the one who called you out. Come at me if you can.” Wei WuXian said from behind them.

“It will be your turn soon.” Wen Chao told him, then raised the whip and struck, first Lan WangJi across the chest, then Lan SiZhui. Before he could continue, Jin ZiXuan appeared next to them.

“Wen Chao, do not cross the line!”

“Oh, I am so scared!” Wen Chao mocked and raised the whip, this time his eyes on Wei WuXian. Before it made contact though, Lan WangJi shook his guards off and jumped, just in time to catch the whip. Glaring furiously at Wen Chao, he hurled it away without looking. Wen Chao stepped back, tilting his head to the side. “Release them.” He said after a pause. The guards released both Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian, who collapsed after being bound. Lan SiZhui jumped on his feet to support him, even if himself felt too faint. On Wei WuXian’s other side, Lan WangJi did the same.

Wen Chao stepped closer.

“Wei WuXian, let’s have a talk. The chances are, you want to ask Lan Wangji the whereabouts of the Yin Iron, am I right? It is here in Nightless City. What further questions do you have? You were on the right track. We, the Wen Sect, have three shards of the Yin Iron. Thanks to the gentleman next to you, Second Young Master Lan. A wise man submits to his circumstances. There is only one shard missing, if that bastard Xue Yang did not take it, it must be you who hid it. Wei WuXian, Lan WangJi has no idea where the shard was hidden. I cannot say the same thing about you.”

“Wen Chao, stop babbling.” Wei WuXian told him quietly.

“Hm. But perhaps it’s not even you, who knows, but...” He tilted his head to the side and looked over at Lan SiZhui. “But you.” At that, both Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian looked up at him confused, then following his gaze, looked at Lan SiZhui, who didn’t meet their eyes.

“Lan SiZhui?” Wei WuXian whispered.

“That’s right.” Wen Chao grinned. “According to your friends, you’re supposed to be the smart one.” He raised his voice. “But still, day after day you returned to the mountains without caring what you were talking about. Ah, I must thank you as well. Without you figuring out immortals held the shards in places where positive energy flowed, we’d have never found the second shard.” Lan SiZhui looked up sharply at that. If Wen Chao knew about that, what else could he have heard?

“Lan SiZhui?” Wei WuXian asked beside him, confused.

“Mm. Lan SiZhui, that’s your name, isn’t it? Wen SiZhui just doesn’t have the same ring to it.” Lan SiZhui looked down, squeezing his eyes shut, feeling a blush creep up his cheeks. “Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.” Wen Chao chuckled. “The Wen Sect of Qishan would never betray their own, after all.” Lan SiZhui’s hands clenched into fists, the one on Wei WuXian’s shoulder pulling on the fabric of his robes.

“I am not part of your Sect.” He said quietly. Wen Chao tilted his head to the side.

“It doesn’t matter who raised you. Born a Wen, always a Wen.” He said flatly.

“You misunderstand me.” Lan SiZhui clenched his jaw as he looked up. “The Dafan branch might’ve been forced under your regime, but they are nothing like the Wen Sect of Qishan.”

“Ah!” Wen Chao clapped his hand, delighted. “Of course, Wen Qing is your cousin if I recall correctly. So, you are another one of those... healers?”

“I am Lan SiZhui of the Lan Sect of Gusu.”

“Denying your nature will not change who you are.” Wen Chao said condescendingly. “Why would you choose a Sect that is no more anyways?” Lan SiZhui closed his eyes, thankful for the environment they were in. Even though Wei WuXian and Jin ZiXuan found it unbearable, Lan SiZhui welcomed the smell, for it was the first time in over a week he didn’t have the smell of charred meat in his nose. Wen Chao clicked his tongue. “You will come to realize you’re on the wrong side of history, Lan SiZhui.” He crouched and leaned close. “And when you do? I will be there to greet you at the gates of Nightless City.” Lan SiZhui turned his head away, only years of practice and discipline holding him back.

Wen Chao snorted as he straightened, looking down the line of his nose at them. “But I know you have no idea where the Yin Iron shard is. After all, every time you thought you’ve found one, you were late. Wei WuXian however...” He looked over at the other man. “Whether you have a shard of the Yin Iron, we have plenty of time to find out.” He told Wei WuXian. “Soldiers, take him into the dungeon.” At that, Lan WangJi stood and moved in front of Wei WuXian. The soldiers halted. Wen Chao looked over them. “What’s the matter? Does Second Young Master Lan want to join him? The Wen Clan’s dungeon is quite spacious.”

Lan WangJi glared at him, then his eyes dropped, his head moving in Lan SiZhui’s direction. Before he could make a decision, Wei WuXian looked over at Lan SiZhui as well, then gently pried his hand that still clutched the other’s robes off him and stood.

“Young Master Wen, a dungeon is warm in winter and cool in summer. That’s most welcome for me.” He said as he stepped past Lan WangJi.

“Let’s see how tough you can be. Take him.” Wen Chao glared, then turned and left, while Wei WuXian was grabbed as well. Lan SiZhui jumped on his feet, broken leg throbbing, but despite that, he tried to move forward, follow Master Wei, help him. Before he could take two steps, he was stopped by Lan WangJi. Lan SiZhui halted, not willing to go against his senior, even though every cell in his body screamed at him to stop this madness.

“Go back to work!” One of the remaining guards barked, and so the three of them turned and continued their punishment.



## Persistence III.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The days were long under the scorching sun as they stood in the courtyard, forced to read the *Quintessence of the Wen Sect* out loud in some attempt to make them memorize it. Lan SiZhui didn't bother. His leg was hurting so much, he could barely stand, and they were not given nor shade, nor water.

It was no wonder Nie HuaiSang fainted on the second day of it and haven't returned afterwards. If Lan SiZhui didn't have practice in bearing even the harshest circumstances during his punishments – and if Wen Chao thought he had anything on the GusuLan handstands, where they didn't only need to copy but it had to be up to standard as well to be sellable, he was very much wrong – he might've fainted as well.

As it was, he closed his eyes and meditated instead. It wasn't the most comfortable standing up, but he managed. The guards went around and checked on them constantly, but Lan SiZhui was either too irrelevant or they didn't care enough, he was never told to start reading or to straighten up.

Wen Chao had taken a shining to him though. Every day at sunrise Lan SiZhui was the first he asked to recite the *Quintessence of the Wen Sect* and at sundown he was the last he asked. He admired that Lan WangJi protested in his own way by refusing to answer every time he was called, but Lan SiZhui had been raised to always do his best. Just because the words tasted sour, didn't mean he hadn't memorized them the first time he'd read the scroll, and he had a feeling Hanguang-Jun did as well.

So, for days he stood under the scorching sun without shade and water and regular breaks and he thought, maybe, just maybe, the four Sects hadn't been that wrong to hate the Wen so much. It was torture of its own kind.

It was the tenth day since the others had arrived to the Nightless City, seven days since the lectures under the sun had started. They had just finished for the day, Lan SiZhui reciting the text from the book without flaws. They were led back to their rooms. The door closed behind them, and Lan SiZhui shuffled over to his bed, ready to sleep, when he noticed a single letter on top of the table and he froze.

The cover was golden, expensive, and crafty. The seal was the symbol of a white peony. The world spun around Lan SiZhui as his gaze was glued to the sight of the letter, and bile rose in the back of his throat. He didn't even register Hanguang-Jun walk over and pick up the letter until he held it out and said gently:

"It is for you." Lan SiZhui took it with trembling hands, then sat at the table. Lan WangJi settled across him, even though at this time he would be getting ready for bed as well. Lan SiZhui rubbed his fingers on the expensive material before he opened it gently.

*‘SiZhui,*

*I hope the Wen Sect didn’t lie about the Jin Sect having more privileges due to Jin GuangShan’s cooperation than the other Sects, and my letter reaches you safely. I’m sorry for being mysterious and informal in my wording, but I’m confident you will understand my references anyways. These days I am not sure who actually reads my letters. The other day just as I handed one to a courier, I saw a Wen guard open it. I threw my inkpot at his head. I hope this is a warning enough to prying eyes to stop reading other people’s letters. He walked around with black skin for days!*

*I’ve heard the news about your home... I hope you and JingYi didn’t get hurt. Everything went as last time, but in case your memory needs refreshing, here are the latest news from the world:*

*The Nie Sect had been attacked. The Unclean Realm had not fallen, but they didn’t come out as winners either. They seem to be at a standstill.*

*YunmengJiang shut down completely. After Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng had been sent to Nightless City, Yunmeng had closed its doors and not even traders are allowed inside.*

*The Cloud Recesses had been officially ruled under the Wen Sect’s supervision and they’ve started rebuilding – under the Wen’s watchful eye, of course. I’ve heard the survivors are being worked as slaves. Grandmaster Lan is hurt, and they’re hardly letting healers inside. Wen Xu is chasing ZeWu-Jun, but from how frustrated he is, I don’t think he has any idea where to even start looking.*

*Jin GuangShan, claiming to be close with the Wen Sect for generations had welcomed Wen Xu for a short visit, whereas they discussed their cooperation. They do not help the Wen but they do not help anyone else either. I am almost ashamed to call myself Jin.*

*I suppose you know all this. I suppose it’s just really boring, training all day. Oh! I got a sword. It’s one for kids to practice with, not a real spiritual weapon, but I named it Xianzi nonetheless.*

*Anyways.*

*I asked around when the Wen Sect’s people were here. Some of these dogs had been to Cloud Recesses when the battle was fought and it took every restraint in me not to stab them. Well, I did give one of them a black eye before I was pulled off him. I hope the scumbag loses his vision.*

*I’ve heard you were the only disciple they took to Qishan. Well, they didn’t say your name, but they said: “that boy asked for whatever was done to Second Young Master to be done to him, too” with different words I do not wish to recite. I figured only one person could be so utterly moronic to do that.*

*SiZhui, without revealing any private details in this letter, let me ask you: What the Hell?! Wasn’t it you who insisted we do not meddle with such matters? Then you turn around and*

*throw yourself in the middle of a battle – are you insane?! Just how much of a hypocrite are you?! Idiot.*

*What you asked me to do, the search, it revealed nothing. I've found one clue but it proved to be another dead end. The thing was probably hidden there before, because people speak of an immortal spirit of a lady nearby with a flourishing garden – you must know what that means – but when I arrived it was dead as was the lady. I was late again.*

*I hope JingYi is ok. I've heard about you, about your family, but I haven't heard anything about him. He is not with you, so he might've stayed at his home. He either didn't receive my letters or couldn't answer. I'm actually writing this on the night before I leave to check on him myself.*

*I've heard they're planning the Indoctrination to last three months like the GusuLan lectures, but we all know how it worked out last time, so I'll see you in around a month, hopefully. I cannot write freely about my plans of traveling, but I still want to let you know where to find me if this is all over. If I can, after I hopefully find JingYi, we'll try to go to uncle's place. If you survive the Indoctrination, come, look for us there. If we can't go there, then we'll most likely end up where you lived as a child. We will wait for you there, hopefully JingYi included.*

*I suppose I just wanted you to receive some news from the world. No letters were allowed to be sent to guest disciples in Qishan before, and I can only write to you now because the letter is from Lanling. You probably won't be allowed to write back. I won't ask how you're doing. We'll talk about that when we meet.*

*Until then,*

*Jin Ling'*

“Grandmaster is hurt.” Lan SiZhui said when he read the letter a second time as well. Lan WangJi looked down. “Jin Ling says the Wen Sect is forcing the survivors to rebuild the Cloud Recesses. They won't allow healers inside.”

“Brother?” Lan WangJi asked quietly.

“Still on the run. Wen Xu is chasing him but failing.”

“Your family?” Lan SiZhui just shook his head. “Jin Ling?” Lan SiZhui looked up, surprised at the question. He supposed, Jin Ling was also his family now.

“He's fine. Training in Lanling, about to head to Gusu. He doesn't know where Lan JingYi is, so he wants to find him.” Lan WangJi nodded. “This doesn't mean letters can come and go now though.” He sighed as he folded the letter back up. “Jin Ling says it's only because the Jin Sect is cooperating with the Wen Sect that they have privileges such as this, and even their letters are read by Wen guards.”

“Mn. Let us rest for the night.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.”



Two days later everyone was required to recite the principles, one by one. Wen Chao ordered, if anyone got even one thing wrong, they'd start memorizing all over again. So far most of the pushback had disappeared, and only Jin ZiXuan and Lan WangJi refused to answer anymore, though there had been other disciples before as well. It felt like something broke when Jin ZiXuan was called and instead of his usual "no", he started reciting the principles. His defiance had been broken down.

Lan WangJi still refused to answer. Lan SiZhui knew he'd refuse until the end. He closed his eyes, chapped lips tight and sore as he was called last, stood in front of the thousand steps leading up to the palace and recited the principles without looking at Wen Chao once.

Since Lan WangJi did not pass, they were ordered to continue reading out loud. It was the third day of that when a guard ran up to Wen Chao with a golden letter in his hands. Wen Chao often handled whatever business he had like that, so no one paid him any mind until he stood, letter in hand and raised a hand.

"Enough!" He called out and everyone looked up, confused by that. Once the courtyard quieted, Wen Chao looked over them. "I have just heard that one of you had been receiving letters." He said slowly. "I do not recall giving you the privilege of communicating with your families, have I?" He raised the golden letter and shook it. He paused, then looked at the Jin disciples and Lan SiZhui felt secretly relieved. His leg was sore enough, he didn't think he'd take more punishment.

"Young Master Jin, how is your father?" Jin ZiXuan frowned.

"I did not receive letters from my family."

"Why are you lying?" Wen Chao shook the letter again. "This is your Sect's seal is it not?"

"I haven't received letters." Jin ZiXuan insisted and Lan SiZhui's heart pounded in his chest. Wen Chao glared at Jin ZiXuan, but then just snorted. He broke the seal and shook out the letter.

"Wen Chao! Do not read others' letters!" Someone called out from the crowd.

"But it is not addressed. How else will I know who is it for? After all, I want to deliver it properly. The courier who brought it had not been the one who it was originally given, and all they told him was to bring it to the Qishan guest disciple quarters. What kind of host I'd be if I didn't even attempt to deliver it properly?" He paused, then looked down at the letter. His eyes narrowed. "SiZhui, it says." He frowned, looking over at Lan SiZhui, who lowered his eyes. There was another pause. "Let's see what else it says." He said meanly and lifted the letter to eye-level.

"Wen Chao, that's enough!" Jin ZiXuan suddenly exclaimed. "This is a violation I didn't think you were capable of."

“Is it a violation?” Wen Chao frowned. “As I see it, you are not allowed to receive letters, much less Lan SiZhui.” He turned to glare at said boy. “Let it be his punishment: to receive his letter... publicly.” He lifted the letter again and cleared his throat.

“‘SiZhui,’” he started in a monotone, bored voice, “‘once again, I hope this letter reaches you safely. Another one of my letters had been read by the Wen. This time I didn’t stop at my inkpot.’” He paused and glanced up at Lan SiZhui. “‘Whatever, I’m sure you don’t care. I wouldn’t. There’s still no news on ZeWu-Jun, as I’m sure you’re curious, but probably know. Wen Xu is running around like a headless chicken, trying to find him. If he wasn’t as vile as well, it would be funny.’” A chuckle rippled through the disciples in the courtyard. “Quiet!” Wen Chao snapped, waited for them to fall silent, then continued. “‘How did it go last time? Do you remember? I don’t, though history had never been my strong suit.

“‘There’s other news as well, more relevant for us. My uncle went missing as well, after you’ve left Qinghe. We all know why. I’m afraid his plans had been put into motion already. How do we stop him, with you in Qishan and with JingYi missing? I don’t even know where to start. Perhaps, you could try to find out something from where you are. But again, I’m sure you’re watched just as closely as everyone else is out here. I’m starting to think this idea of ours was a barren one from the start. You were right as always, and as always, I didn’t listen.

“‘There’s no news on JingYi either. I’m writing from your home, but they won’t let anyone into the mountains, I have no way of checking. I’m planning on going to JingYi’s hometown, see if he’s hiding there. Worst case scenarios are starting to rise in my mind.

“‘I’m afraid not much changed since my last letter. Qinghe is still at standstill and Yunmeng is still closed. Oh! You’ll be delighted to hear Grandmaster is still alive. But you know that, probably. I’m just struggling because what I wish to write I cannot. I long for home and even find myself missing my uncle’s yelling and my duties. How stupid is that?

“‘Anyways. I do not know what else to write. I suppose I just feel lost in this strange, new world. The Wen are truly as vile as they say. You’d probably disagree, but I kind of see why everyone wanted their blood. If I cannot find JingYi, I do not know what else to do. Going back to Lanling for training doesn’t seem right. I feel like I should be doing something, like you’d probably do. I don’t even know if my letters are reaching you at all. I did not know war would be like this.

“‘I’ll write once I have anything else to say. Be the good little disciple you are and don’t stir up trouble. You know you’re not cut out for that. Jin Ling.’” Wen Chao snapped the letter closed in his hands, crunching up the paper in the process. There was a pause, then he snorted. “Lan SiZhui, did it feel good to hear from your friend?” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer. Throughout the letter, especially when Cloud Recesses were mentioned, Wei WuXian kept looking over at them, and now he huffed, annoyed.

“Wen Chao, what was the point of reading that out loud?” He stepped forward. “It is obvious Jin Ling is just lonely. There’s no conspiracy in the letter. You did all that for nothing.” He was probably trying to ease the humiliation from Lan SiZhui, but it didn’t work. Jiang WanYin hissed and pulled Wei WuXian back, whispering something to him.

“The point? It was punishment. But now, everyone must feel relieved to have heard news about their homes. That must help your... hm... moral a little, shouldn’t it?” He grinned meanly. “No need to thank me, thank...” He trailed off, opening the letter again, then made a triumphant sound. “Thank Jin Ling for his words. Let this motivate you to do better. Your families at home are going to benefit if you do well here. So, once again, once everyone here can recite the principles, we can move on with your training. It is good for everyone, isn’t it?” He paused, looking over the disciples in the courtyard.

“Continue!” He called out, and the guards from the side started patrolling the rows again. Wen Chao sat in his chair and called one of his guards over, telling him something, which the guard bowed at, then hurried away. Wen Chao reclined in his chair and rubbed his chin, eyes on Lan SiZhui as the disciples around them chanted together. Lan SiZhui looked away.

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The day was over and Lan SiZhui didn’t want anything else but to return to their rooms and rest. Wen Chao, however, had different plans, for they were not escorted back to their quarters, but towards the lower levels of the palace instead. Lan SiZhui looked at Lan WangJi with wide, frightened eyes. Lan WangJi’s calm gaze reassured him, but not enough to settle his anxiety as they were led into an office. Wen Chao was sitting on a raised chair, a table full of papers in front of him, but instead of documents, two golden, open letters were laid out in front of him. Once they stepped inside, he looked up.

“Ah, here you are. Restrain WangJi, I do not want him interfering. I just want him to watch.” He said as he tilted his head to the side. Lan SiZhui turned to his senior, alarmed as two guards unsheathed their swords and held them to his neck, but then two guards stepped behind Lan SiZhui, stopping him from moving. Lan SiZhui turned back to Wen Chao.

“Young Master Wen, Second Young Master Lan had nothing to do with the letters. It was me who received them.”

“I know.” He said flatly. He paused as he looked down at the letters, knocking a finger on top of them. “You have quite the friend here. He’s risking his life to send you these letters. I don’t know how they got past my guards, but I will find out. Until then, I must inform my father about the Jin Sect’s audacity to take such liberties.” He paused. “Since I know who sent these letters, it won’t be a hardship to find Jin Ling and question him.”

“No!” Lan SiZhui looked up, eyes wide.

“Now that got a reaction?” Wen Chao laughed, delighted. “Who is he to you that you’re so close? He’s a junior Jin disciple, according to Wen Qing, quite a temperamental one as well. The two of you being friends... She said it was strange, but that you had some blood ties. Is that true?”

“It is not.”

“No? Was Wen Qing lying? She’s your cousin, think about your answer.”

“Me and Jin Ling are cousins by association.” Perhaps it was not a good idea to reveal that, but Lan SiZhui didn’t want to cause trouble for Wen Qing either. Wen Chao rubbed his chin in thought.

“I see. It seems he’s referring to multiple uncles in his letters. Who are they?” Lan SiZhui remained quiet. “He doesn’t seem worried about either of them, so they can’t be Lan. I doubt he’d be so careless if they were Wen, which means you must be associated with another Sect as well. Lan SiZhui, you’re a very strange young man.” He paused again. “No answer? Well then.”

“Young Master Wen, what is the point?” Lan WangJi asked from the side. Wen Chao hummed.

“Right, right. This isn’t why I called you here. While I know Lan WangJi, nor Wei WuXian know where the last shard is, that only leaves you unaccounted for. Your friend, Jin Ling, seems to have looked for the other shards on his own. Listen to this:

*“What you asked me to do, the search, it revealed nothing. I’ve found one clue but it proved to be another dead end. The thing was probably hidden there before, because people speak of an immortal spirit of a lady nearby with a flourishing garden – you must know what that means – but when I arrived it was dead as was the lady. I was late again.”*

“So, he hasn’t found the shard in the *Damsel of Annual Blossoms*’ garden. That was where the second shard was, in case you were wondering.” He pursed his lips. “Since you also went to search for the Yin Iron, I’m confident you must have any idea where the last one is. Tell me and you and Second Young Master Lan are free to go.”

“Young Master Wen, I’m afraid I cannot answer.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer. Wen Chao nodded at something over Lan SiZhui’s shoulder, then his left leg, the broken one, was kicked from behind. Lan SiZhui couldn’t stop the scream that ripped from his throat, and even as he buckled on his knees, hands grabbed him under his arms, not letting him slump on the ground. “How about now?”

“I cannot.” Lan SiZhui pushed out between clenched teeth. Wen Chao looked to the side. There was a pause, then a grunt, and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw Lan WangJi also on his knees, teeth clenched. Lan SiZhui didn’t notice the whimper that escaped his throat.

“We have all night to do this, you know.” Wen Chao stood, walking over to Lan SiZhui and crouching in front of him. “Tell me what I want to know and your precious Second Young Master will be taken back to your rooms right away.” His tone was almost kind, but Lan SiZhui didn’t believe him.

“I don’t know what you want to know.”

“Jin Ling seems to think you do.”

“Jin Ling is not me.”

“Well...” He looked over where Lan Wangji was kneeling. “For the night, Second Young Master Lan is. So, whatever happens to either of you, happens to the other as well. I’m sure you’d not hesitate to take pain for protecting your secrets, but could you bear feeling his pain as well as being the cause of it?”

“I don’t know what you want to know.”

Wen Chao sighed heavily at that, clicking his tongue. He kept looking at Lan Sizhui for a few more seconds, then stood. “Prepare the whip.” He ordered coldly and Lan Sizhui’s heart stopped for a moment.

“No!” He struggled. He couldn’t be the reason Hanguang-Jun was whipped, not again! He’d only seen the scars once in his life. Only asked his adoptive father once what they meant. He didn’t get an answer, but whatever it was, it couldn’t have been worse than being the byproduct of someone else’s stubbornness, a meaningless sacrifice.

“You don’t give me a choice, Lan Sizhui.”

“I’ll tell you where the last shard is!” He said desperately.

He’d planned on doing this, playing this card with Wen Xu, back at the Cloud Recesses before they were taken. The Wen never talked to the ghosts of the Burial Mounds, so he could easily tell them it was there. Without Lan Jingyi’s Graveyard-Purging talismans, no one would survive the Burial Mounds anyways. They’d never figure out his bluff.

Wen Chao raised his hand, signaling his guards to stop their machinations and turned, tilting his head to the side.

“So, you do know.”

“If I tell you, you won’t hurt Second Young Master Lan, right?”

“Lan Sizhui.” Lan Wangji’s strained voice warned him coldly. Lan Sizhui ignored him.

“If you tell me, I won’t touch a hair on him ever again.”

“No.” Lan Sizhui surprised Wen Chao. He frowned. “If I tell you, if you have knowledge about someone wanting to hurt Second Young Master Lan, you stop it from happening.”

“You’re clever with your tongue, aren’t you?” Wen Chao snorted. Lan Sizhui didn’t answer. “All right. If you tell me, no one from the Wen Sect will hurt Second Young Master Lan.”

“No.” Wen Chao glared at him. “If you have knowledge about someone wanting to hurt Second Young Master Lan, you stop it from happening.” He repeated stubbornly.

“Why are you so insistent on the wording? I just said I wouldn’t let the Wen Sect hurt him. Isn’t that generous enough?”

“Young Master Wen. There are many disciples here who are not part of the Wen Sect of Qishan. And I don’t trust that you wouldn’t ask someone from another Sect, probably force



them, to do your bidding.”

“So, your friends weren’t lying then.” Wen Chao snorted. “You *are* the smart one.” He paused, then sighed. “Fine, so be it. During the Indoctrination, no one will hurt Second Young Master Lan anymore. There, satisfied?” No, but it’ll have to do. Lan SiZhui nodded. “Good. Now, where is the last shard?” He asked eagerly, stepping closer with his head tilted to the side.

“In the YiLing Burial Mounds.”

“It isn’t.” Wen Chao frowned. “You’ve been to YiLing for almost two weeks, and you don’t have it.”

“Because we could never enter safely.”

“You spent some time inside.”

“We spent time flying a safe distance away from the surging resentful energy. We’ve got hurt anyways. But we could never enter safely.” Which wasn’t a lie. Technically. Jin Ling would be proud of his clever tongue.

“How do you know it’s inside then?” Wen Chao frowned.

“It used to be the Grandmaster, Xue ChongHai’s residence. That is where he’d sacrificed live people to fill the Yin Iron with resentful energy before he had been killed by Wen Mao and the Yin Iron had been broken into pieces.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s there.”

“Young Master Wen, why do you think thousands of cultivators had never been able to cleanse the Burial Mounds of YiLing?” It was a genuine question, but what Wen Chao assumed from it had been less than innocent. If he thought Lan SiZhui asked it because he wanted to imply the Yin Iron had made cleansing the Burial Mounds so hard, then it was his own fault.

“Second Young Master Lan, what do you think?” Wen Chao asked, not taking his narrowed eyes off Lan SiZhui. “Is he telling the truth?” Lan WangJi didn’t answer, and Lan SiZhui was afraid to look at him.

“Young Master Wen, I held up my end and told you what you wanted to know.” Lan SiZhui said after a minute of silence.

“Take them.” Wen Chao said, waving a hand dismissively. The guards tugged Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi on their feet and dragged them out of Wen Chao’s office, back towards their rooms.

Once they were pushed inside, Lan SiZhui didn’t stumble like Lan WangJi did, but collapsed on the ground, reaching for his broken leg, clenching his teeth tight. He felt like they broke it all over again and the pain was even more violent than before. A hand grabbed his wrist.

“No!” He cried out in alarm, wanting to protect his leg.

“Lan SiZhui. Let me see.” Hanguang-Jun’s calm voice insisted and he looked up into his adoptive father’s youthful face. It wasn’t the face he grew up with, but it was one he still knew so well. He nodded and pulled his hand away. Hanguang-Jun was gentle as he guided him so he sat properly, leaning on his hands behind him. Lan WangJi pulled his robes away gently, to reveal his leg playing in deep purple, bright red and some yellow on the edges.

“How bad is it?” Lan SiZhui asked, surprised to find he was trying to hold sobs back from breaking free from his chest.

“Bad.” Lan WangJi said simply. He stood, looked around, then left before returning. He had the strip of fabric they used as bandages before in his hands, and he folded it a few times until it became a handful bundle of white. He looked sternly at Lan SiZhui. “Bite.” He lifted the bundle to his mouth.

“What?” Lan SiZhui asked faintly.

“Bite.” He repeated. The only reason Lan SiZhui took the fabric in his mouth and bit down on it was because he trusted Hanguang-Jun. He still eyed him skeptically as he turned back to his leg. He gently placed cold hands below and above the area that discolored. “Lan SiZhui. I am going to feel the break now and if it does not align I’m going to have to set it. It is going to hurt.” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened and he shook his head. That sounded like something that a healer should do while Lan SiZhui was unconscious!

“Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly.” Lan SiZhui sluggishly did as he was instructed. He jumped at the first touch, gentle pressure around the break. The closer Hanguang-Jun got to it, the harder it was to breathe regularly, and his jaw hurt from biting the fabric so tightly. One Hanguang-Jun got to the most sensitive part, he couldn’t hold it back, and he fell on his back on the ground, muffled scream tearing from his throat.

He thought there would be a pause, at least a little warning, but then Hanguang-Jun twisted his leg, there was a snap and Lan SiZhui passed out.



It was warm in the room. They were deep in Nightless City, which meant they were surrounded by walls and rarely any breeze found its way inside the room. The air was stuffy and humid, but that was probably because of the sweat that chilled Lan SiZhui from the outside. He blinked up at the ceiling, then pushed himself up on his elbows. He looked down. There were strips of fabric laid over his broken leg and they felt heavy and damp, not cold anymore either. His leg was bandaged as well, like that first week. Something fell in his lap and he noticed another piece of fabric, also damp. It was probably on his forehead.

He looked around. The light suggested it was the afternoon and that suggested he was probably alone in the room. He sighed heavy and let himself fall back on the bed. Looking to the side he noticed a bowl and his headband there. He pushed himself up to lean against the headboard and reached over to pick up the bowl. It was some kind of vegetable soup. Tasting it, it was horrible, stale and plain. He put it back, then leaned against the wall, closing his

eyes to meditate, hopefully help his healing. He didn't feel much pain in his leg, but it was for the better.

Hours passed before there was any movement outside, then the doors opened and closed. He recognized Lan WangJi's light footsteps, as something was set on the low table, then the privacy screen was pushed aside. Lan WangJi didn't seem surprised to see him up. He sat on the bed next to his hip and reached out, feeling his forehead. He nodded.

"Good. Your fever's gone down." He glanced over at the soup and picked it up, offering it to him. Lan SiZhui made a face.

"It doesn't taste right." He said.

"Mn. I picked up some herbs from the vegetable garden these past few days. It should help." He offered it again and Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

"You were in the vegetable gardens?" He asked as he accepted the bowl. Not having his headband on, he allowed himself to eat while Lan WangJi spoke.

"I have insulted the Wen Sect." He looked away.

"Why?" Lan SiZhui asked, frowning.

"To be able to pick out herbs from the vegetable garden."

"Oh." Lan SiZhui looked down at the disgusting soup and with a deep breath, he drank it up in one go. When he lowered the bowl, he caught an almost-smile on Lan WangJi's face. "Thank you."

"Wei Ying did the same." Lan WangJi noted as he took the bowl and moved to the sitting area. With the privacy screen folded up, Lan SiZhui could see him still.

"Young Master Wei had been hurt as well?" Lan SiZhui blinked. Since he came back from the dungeons, beaten and wounded, Wei WuXian had been acting almost suspiciously good.

"Hid his injuries. Got punished when he tried to defend me when I insulted the Wen Sect." Lan SiZhui's eyebrows rose high, but he didn't comment.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Three days and two nights."

"Ah, good." Lan SiZhui let some of his tension go. "I was afraid..."

"What?"

"It's nothing." Lan SiZhui shook his head. He couldn't tell Lan WangJi that soon they'd leave to hunt down the Tortoise of Slaughter and he was afraid they'd already left. "I just don't like to leave you alone here." He looked down, then something occurred to him. "Oh, right,

Second Young Master Lan, how is your leg? You got hurt the other night too, didn't you?" He turned to look at Lan WangJi, trying to see if his leg seemed worse at all.

"Did not." He shook his head, preparing their dinner. Lan SiZhui took the implication and tied his forehead ribbon back before carefully getting out of bed. "The branch." Lan WangJi said, nodding towards the wall by the bed. There was indeed a branch leaned against it, long and thick enough to take Lan SiZhui's weight, so before proceeding, he picked it up and leaned on it as he limped over to the table.

"Second Young Master Lan didn't get hurt the other night?" Lan SiZhui asked as he settled in to eat. The herbal soup was little and he felt hungry anyways.

"Kicked the wrong leg." He said and then picked up his chopsticks. "Eat. Talk after." So, they did. After they were done, Hanguang-Jun didn't stand to carry the tray to the door like usual, just piled dirty dishes on it and set it aside. He looked at Lan SiZhui coldly. He lowered his eyes in answer. "You lied."

"Second Young Master Lan?" He raised his eyes in question.

"You did not go to YiLing to investigate your family."

"Oh." He looked down again. "I apologize, Second Young Master Lan."

"Mn." The sound was strangely impatient. "Why?"

"We knew you wouldn't let us go there if we told you the truth."

"You could've not reasoned, just requested leave."

"Really?" Lan SiZhui frowned. "Ah, I thought..." He trailed off.

"Continue."

"Right. Second Young Master Lan, I did not want to lie, but we had no other choice. When we discovered the shard wasn't in the Cold Pond Cave anymore, we were in a hurry to get to the other pieces before they were discovered by Wen RuoHan. We couldn't wait for the Lectures to end."

"How do you know about the Yin Iron?"

"I..." He trailed off, not wanting to lie again. "I heard about it from history."

"It is not taught anywhere." Lan SiZhui remained quiet. "You found out about it in the Forbidden Room." It was a reasonable assumption, so Lan SiZhui stayed silent, letting Lan WangJi assume. "That day Jin Ling lied. You did get in. We caught you on your way out."

"Yes."

"How did you find out Wen RuoHan was also looking for them?" Silence. "When you found out, why didn't you go to Grandmaster or ZeWu-Jun?"

“We figured they kept it a secret for a reason. And it is dangerous knowledge. If they didn’t know about it, we didn’t want to put them in danger.” He paused. “And we didn’t want to get into trouble for committing such severe crimes.”

“You betrayed their trust instead.” Lan SiZhui flinched.

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” There was a long pause.

“You invented the Graveyard-Purging talisman to get into the Burial Mounds.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.”

“Did you succeed?”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.”

“And?”

“We haven’t found it.” He shook his head. “The resentful energy there was incredibly hostile. We couldn’t stay for longer than an hour at a time. Then the third time we went, I inquired the spirit about it. It told us the history of the Yin Iron, and that it wasn’t there anymore.”

“You led Wen Chao astray.”

“I planned on doing it with Wen Xu at the Cloud Recesses, but you stopped me.” He nodded.

“What happens if he finds out you lied?”

“Ah, Second Young Master Lan, I didn’t lie.” Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes. “I cannot help what others assume from my words.” He paused, realizing he didn’t answer the question. “I assume he will punish me. Maybe even kill me.”

“What is Jin Ling’s uncle planning?” The question caught him off guard and he looked up with furrowed brows. Lan WangJi just looked at him questioningly.

“It’s not relevant.” He shook his head.

“What else did you lie about?” This question was said almost angrily. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes and remained silent. He couldn’t tell Lan WangJi.

And thinking about it, he realized just how much he had lied about these past few months. Four months in the past and he broke more rules than all his life combined. More serious ones, too. It didn’t matter how much he told himself he was doing it out of necessity. The reality was, he had betrayed so much of the Lan Sect principles, he didn’t even know what his crimes were anymore. That, more than anything, terrified him. How will he ever make up for so much he’d done?

“I’m sorry.” He whispered to himself. To the future Hanguang-Jun, who expected better of him. This Lan WangJi did not know him, but somewhere out there, a future version of the young man who sat in front of him would *hate* him.

“Go and rest.” Lan WangJi said after minutes of them sitting there and not looking at each other. “Wen Chao had threatened to drag you out if you don’t get better in two days’ time. Gather your strength.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” The broken whisper went unacknowledged as Lan WangJi picked up the tray and proceed their nightly rituals, preparing for bed. Lan SiZhui sat there until Lan WangJi settled, then using the branch he limped back to his bed.

He did not sleep well that night, nor the coming nights.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Jin Ling’s sword: 仙子 Xiānzǐ: “Fairy”

# Persistence IV.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Where are we going?” Lan SiZhui heard someone in the crowd whisper as they were led through and outside of Qishan. He put on a brave face and kept up the pace, just like Lan WangJi next to him, partially because he wasn’t going to give Wen Chao reason for him to bully them more, partially because the guards didn’t let them slack. Once they were outside and in the surrounding forests though, the terrain didn’t let him pull his leg unnoticed.

“Are we going on a night-hunt?” Someone wondered out loud.

“The guards are whispering about a monster.” Someone else said.

“They’re making us do their dirty work!” Another exclaimed.

“Here’s good enough!” Wen Chao called out from behind them. The guards stopped everyone in their tracks and turned them towards Wen Chao. Being at the very back, Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi got to the very front. There was a woman sitting in front of Wen Chao on the horse, looking over them with a scowl.

“We’ve received word that creatures are gathering in the area. Go and look for them. Prove that you are worthy cultivators of your Sects!” She barked. When nobody moved, Wen Chao called out from behind her:

“What are you waiting for?! Scram!”

So, nearly forty people started to aimlessly walking around. Some looked even under the smallest of flowers to pretend they were looking for the monsters. The guards kept running around, herding everyone back towards the bigger group who wandered off too far.

Lan SiZhui wondered how they were supposed to find anything if they weren’t even allowed to look around properly. Instead of even pretending to look, Lan SiZhui used this time to lean against a tree and rest. Before he could get too comfortable, a guard pushed his shoulder from behind.

“Don’t get lazy! Go and look!”

“Sir, we’re not in a dense forest, so we can see there are no monsters here. There is no point looking. If any creature had been here, it is gone by now.”

“Is it?” The guard frowned at him. “I suppose this Young Master is so talented, he doesn’t even need to make an effort, does he.” Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes at the harsh tone. “Should I tell Young Master Wen we have a talented Master in our circles?” He chuckled meanly. “Or would you rather tell him yourself?!”

“Guard.” Came the bored drawl of Wen Chao from the side as he rode up to them. “What’s going on?”

“This disciple is refusing to look, choosing to rest against a tree instead, Young Master.”

“Is that true, Lan SiZhui?” Wen Chao tilted his head to the side.

“Young Master Wen, why are we bothering with him?” The lady in front of him whined. “You promised a monster’s head for me.”

“JiaoJiao, don’t you know who this is? Lan SiZhui is of the Wen Sect.” Wen Chao told her, keeping his eyes on Lan SiZhui even as he caressed her shoulder. Lan SiZhui looked down.

“Isn’t he a Lan?” The lady asked with a frown.

“Hm. Isn’t it curious how he became one? Lan SiZhui, why don’t you tell us why you left the Wen Sect?” Wen Chao raised his eyebrows challengingly. Lan SiZhui remained silent. Wen Chao sighed. “Lan SiZhui, I thought your Sect is very renowned. Would you deny a fine lady’s request?”

Lan SiZhui didn’t answer that he would, if there was a fine lady in sight. He wasn’t Wei WuXian.

“Young Master Wen, he’s boring. Let’s get going, nothing is here anyways.” The lady rubbed herself against Wen Chao. He held up a hand and led his horse two steps closer, leaning down.

“Lan SiZhui, remember our deal from the other night? I said I wouldn’t hurt Lan WangJi. I never said anything about you. Disobey me again and you’ll find your leg will be the smallest of your worries.” With that, he straightened and kicked his horse. As it jumped at the pain, it sent dirt flying and Lan SiZhui had to cover his face with his sleeve not to get any in his eye. “Get in line, we’re moving on!” Wen Chao called out as he led his horse onto the path again.

Lan SiZhui shook off the dirt, then the guard grabbed his arm to push him towards the group. He kept limping until he neared them, but they were already moving, so all he could do was to try to keep up. Eventually Lan WangJi had slowed as well, and soon the two Lan were walking besides each other. Well, limping, for Lan WangJi’s steps became sluggish as well from the uneven ground.

They stopped twice after that, to search the forest even though it was obvious there was nothing there. Lan SiZhui’s leg was alternating between throbbing deeply, which might’ve been even worse than the sharp pain that struck him as he stepped badly, and between numbness, which made him even more anxious if he was going to lose his leg.

At the third stop Lan WangJi didn’t leave his side like the previous two times. As they were limping forwards, some destination in his mind keeping Lan WangJi going, he asked quietly:

“Lan SiZhui. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, Second Young Master Lan.” Lan SiZhui answered.



“I thought we were past the lies.” Lan WangJi said after a pause.

“I am. My leg is hurting but I’m fine.”

“You are white and sweating.”

“Oh.” He raised a hand to his face. It felt cold and wet. “Other than my leg, I feel fine. Honest, Second Young Master Lan.”

“Mn.”

“Lan Zhan.” Wei WuXian stepped in front of them. They halted, although it felt worse to be still than to keep walking. “You still won’t let me carry you?”

“No.” Lan WangJi didn’t even look at Wei WuXian, who pouted at that, then looked over at Lan SiZhui with furrowed brows.

“Lan SiZhui, are you alright?” He asked, stepping closer and raising a hand. Lan SiZhui stepped back and lowered his eyes. Wei WuXian’s hand dropped. “You look awful.”

“I’m fine, Young Master Wei.”

“You’re limping too. Is your leg broken as well?” When he didn’t answer, Wei WuXian clicked his tongue and put his hands on his hips. “Lan SiZhui, don’t be as stubborn as Lan Zhan. It is bad enough he won’t let me help him.”

“Young Master Wei should not waste his time on me. I’m—”

“Lan SiZhui, are you slacking again?” Wen Chao appeared on his horse. Lan SiZhui looked away. “Continue your search and stop talking.”

“Wen Chao, let them stop for a minute. They’re obviously hurt.” Wei WuXian frowned.

“Wei WuXian, stay out of it. Lan SiZhui needs to learn his place.”

“And where would that be?” Wei WuXian raised skeptical eyebrows.

“With his Sect, of course.” Wen Chao answered.

“Isn’t he with his Sect now?” Wei WuXian gestured at Lan WangJi.

“The Lan Sect stole him, but he’s a Wen by birth. Once he accepts that, he might be treated like one, too.” Wen Chao said arrogantly.

“If Lan SiZhui wanted to be a Wen, he would’ve reunited with his cousin during the months they spent together in the Cloud Recesses.”

“Wei WuXian, stop talking about things you don’t understand.” Wen Chao looked over to scoff at Wei WuXian. “Go back to searching.” He said, and with that, he rode off. Wei WuXian frowned after him.

“What’s his problem?” He wondered out loud. Before he could turn back to Lan SiZhui, he walked away as well.



After another hour or so, they finally got a proper break on Wen Qing’s command. Lan SiZhui stayed behind the whole group, partially because he was physically unable to keep up, partially because he didn’t want to talk to Wei WuXian, who glued himself to Lan WangJi’s side.

He loved Wei WuXian, truly, but his spirits were truly down and he had to admit, as patient as he was, his adoptive father was sometimes a bit too much for his mild nature. He often didn’t mind how overbearing he was, loved it, actually, but injured and moody like this, he just couldn’t deal with it.

Not with a Wei WuXian who was looking at him like he was a puzzle to be solved anyways. In the past – future – his adoptive father, even when he didn’t know him, only held affection to him and acted as a mentor. This Wei WuXian was suspicious of him and picked and poked at him to figure out why he was so weird. He understood the mistrust, even if it hurt a little, but that didn’t mean he wanted to deal with it all the time.

They stopped near a river, so they were allowed to sit and refresh themselves. He watched as Lan WangJi sat on a driftwood not far from the water, then went a little further, into the shade and inelegantly flopped on the rocks, his hurt leg extended in front of him. Taking the pressure off it was like a thousand knives or needles stabbed him and he squeezed his eyes shut against the pain.

Once it subdued, he found himself dizzy and sleepy. Uncharacteristically, he let himself lean back on the uncomfortable ground and threw an arm over his eyes. Behind his closed eyelids, first the smiling faces of his friends and family flashed over, then screaming, bloody faces with burning buildings in the background. He lowered his arm and looked up at the branches of the tree above him. The sky was intensely blue between the leaves, unlike what he was used to in the Cloud Recesses.

There was suddenly a kick to his side and he groaned as he curled away, then pushed himself up on one hand, the other rubbing the sore spot.

“Young Master Wen said rest, not sleep.” The guard scowled at him, then continued towards a group of Jin disciples who were talking between themselves.

Lan SiZhui sighed and sat up properly, hugging his uninjured leg to his chest to relieve the pressure from his core muscles, for they felt too faint to hold him upright. He closed his eyes against the glaring white of the rocks. Before he could really slumber, a cold droplet fell on his hand and he looked up sharply. If it was going to start to rain, he truly didn’t know what he’d do to himself. Surprisingly though it was Wei WuXian with a waterskin standing above him, then he crouched in front of him so they were eye-level.

“Here.” Wei WuXian handed over the waterskin. Lan SiZhui nodded his thanks and drank. Apparently, he’d been tricked, because while he was occupied, Wei WuXian pulled his robes

away from his broken leg. Lan SiZhui was too slow reaching to stop him.

“Young Master Wei—”

“It looks really bad.” Wei WuXian said, ignoring him. “You shouldn’t walk on it at all. You could lose your leg.”

“It’s fine.” Lan SiZhui said quietly, tugging his robes down.

“I’ve seen broken limbs before, Lan SiZhui.”

“Mn. I’ve had broken bones before. Truly, it’s fine, Young Master Wei.”

“Lan SiZhui...”

“Young Master Wei should go.” Lan SiZhui looked around for Wen Chao. He was on the shore with his lady friend, thankfully not looking towards them, but showing the scenery to her.

“Lan Zhan asked me to check on you.” Wei WuXian said after a pause. “Well, he was looking for you when he realized you weren’t next to him, and looking around, he spotted you lying here. He wanted to come over, but I told him to stay put.” He looked over his shoulder, where Jiang WanYin stood over Lan WangJi, scowling at the sight of Wen Chao with his arms crossed across his chest. He looked like an annoyed Jin Ling. Lan SiZhui’s lips tugged up in a half-smile at the thought.

“Thank you for caring for us, Young Master Wei.”

“Lan SiZhui, you’re so polite yet you refuse to tell me anything about yourself. Apparently, you also looked for the Yin Iron when me and Lan Zhan had. And you’re a Wen, but also a Lan and Jin Ling is your cousin.”

“By association.” Lan SiZhui corrected automatically. Then sighed. “Young Master Wei, the truth is—” He started, but then Wen Chao’s words cut him off.

“Get up and start moving, all of you!”

“What a timing.” Wei WuXian muttered under his breath, turning his head away. After a pause he turned back to Lan SiZhui. “Lan SiZhui, let me carry you.”

“Young Master Wei, you heard Young Master Wen earlier. It’s better if you don’t help me, or you might get into trouble as well.” He smiled sadly.

“That’s not a no.” Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows. Lan SiZhui chuckled.

“Young Master Wei can help me stand. Then please, forget about me.”

“Lan SiZhui, you cannot ask that of me.” Wei WuXian pouted. “You’re the only Lan I’ve ever known to break the rules.”

“Second Young Master Lan broke some as well. You could ask him about it.” Lan SiZhui offered with a smile. Wei WuXian’s jaw dropped, but before he could ask, a guard marched over.

“Didn’t you hear?! Get moving!”

“We’re coming, we’re coming!” Wei WuXian rolled his eyes, annoyed, then helped Lan SiZhui on his feet, then stepped back with a tight expression.

“I’ll be alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded seriously. Wei WuXian looked over him, then reluctantly nodded, letting Lan SiZhui walk away on his own.

They continued their way along the river. The terrain here had been even worse than in the forest for Lan SiZhui’s leg, and the rest didn’t help, awakening the pain all over again. They went on for a while, then they stopped when a guard approached Wen Chao and his lady friend. The guard bowed to them then said something. Wen Chao stopped their stroll and got off his horse, taking the lady’s hand and helping her off as well. Then he whispered something in the lady’s ear before stepping away from her and calling out:

“All of you, pay attention!” Everyone already was. “A village nearby reported their people going missing in a nearby cave. Everyone look for the entrance!” There were faint murmurs of agreement, then the disciples, much like in the forest, started looking around, under even the most irrelevant rocks.

While Wen Chao and Lady Wen along with the other lady were conversing about something in raised voices, someone activated a talisman and everyone turned to see it making its way towards the mountains on the other shore. Then the talisman activated, and Lan SiZhui realized it was a disorientation trap disabling charm, because the next moment the fog around the mountains cleared, revealing a spot of gaping blackness in the face of the mountain.

“The cave! Young Master Wen, congratulations!” The lady cried delighted, grabbing onto Wen Chao’s arm. It was obvious to everyone that Wen Chao wasn’t the one who revealed it, but nobody pointed it out. If the talisman was anything to go by, Lan SiZhui suspected it was Wei WuXian who found it.

“Come on! Let’s go!” Wen Chao ordered.

“All the way there?!” Someone protested in the crowd.

“Stop complaining!” A guard pushed at a Jin disciple. “Young Master Wen found the cave while you uselessly stood around! Now at least you’ll prove to be useful!”

With that, they were pushed along after the Wen who already headed down the river to find a shallow part where they could cross. Lan SiZhui did his best to keep up. Not seeing Lan WangJi amongst the others, he looked around and found him slightly to his left, a bit ahead of him, being supported by Wei WuXian. Lan SiZhui smiled upon seeing them.

He never asked what their relationship was like before Senior Wei returned from the dead, but he supposed it wasn’t much different. While Senior Wei didn’t use his powers much,

relying on Hanguang-Jun's presence, it was obvious from his demeanor he was, or had been once, a powerful cultivator. If Lan SiZhui had to guess, they were an even match at this time, so it made sense that Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian were companions even when they were younger as well.

More importantly, it brought him great comfort to see them together again. If he ignored the pain and Lan WangJi's limp as well, looking at them, he could easily imagine he was walking behind his adoptive fathers on a night-hunt, much like in Coffin Town or the Burial Mounds. Once, before this whole madness started, he'd been daydreaming about the two seniors setting off and bringing the juniors along with them, lecturing them as they went on night-hunts together, like a family.

Those daydreams seemed so far away now. So impossible.

Crossing the river had been... horrible. There were some disciples who also found it challenging and fell, but a guard was always there to pull them up and yell at them to keep going. Wei WuXian helped Lan WangJi out in front of Lan SiZhui, while he battled with the stream and the slippery rocks. He almost fell twice. Everyone gathered on the other shore, regrouping, while Lan SiZhui was still some ways away, and he tried his best not to get left behind. Wei WuXian sat Lan WangJi down, then looked around. Upon seeing Lan SiZhui still in the water he started towards him, but Wen Chao noticed him just as he entered the water as well.

"Leave him!" He barked. "Don't help him!" Wei WuXian halted. Jiang WanYin was there to take hold of him before he could go against the orders and they watched with pity in their eyes as Lan SiZhui made his way to shore. He stumbled on the last step but was able to hold himself up. Wen Chao snorted at him. "Pathetic." He grumbled. "Let's go!" He called out, not letting Lan SiZhui even think about resting.

"Wen Chao!" Wei WuXian called out in anger. Before he could say anything else though, Jiang WanYin tugged on his arm and whispered something in his ear. Wei WuXian clenched his jaw, glaring at Wen Chao, but backed down. At least one of them had some self-preserving instinct, Lan SiZhui noted in relief.

They headed to the mountain where the cave was. If Lan SiZhui thought the rocks and the forest floor were challenging enough, they had nothing on the uptilt. Lifting his leg to step was like torture, and near him he saw Lan WangJi struggle at least as much as he was. Upon not seeing Wei WuXian by his side, Lan SiZhui made his way over.

"Second Young Master Lan, let me help." He prepared on taking hold of his arm, but Lan WangJi shook him off with a warning, cold glare. Lan SiZhui dropped his hand and eyes. They continued silently. Nearing the entrance of the cave, they stopped for a short break. Lan WangJi sat with the smallest sigh of relief, but Lan SiZhui didn't, not wanting to rest then be jostled again. Soon Wei WuXian approached with his waterskin again.

"Lan SiZhui, sit and rest while you can." He told him with stern eyes. Lan SiZhui silently shook his head as he watched Wei WuXian hand over the waterskin to Lan WangJi, while Jiang WanYin stood behind them, looking away. Their eyes met and Jiang WanYin scowled at him, looking him up and down. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes, the gaze at least familiar.

“Idiot. If you don’t sit, your injury will get worse.” He mumbled quietly, like he didn’t want even Lan SiZhui to know he said it, even though it was addressed to him. Feeling off about the situation, being considered worthy of Jiang WanYin’s attention, he bowed slightly.

“Young Master Jiang, I appreciate the care but it’s worse after I sit.” He said equally as quiet. There was a pause, then Jiang WanYin nodded and looked away.

“Let’s keep moving!” Wen Chao called out.

“You and you!” Wen Chao’s lady friend called out and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw her pointing at himself and Lan WangJi. “Carry the torches, light the way!” Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes. Guards came over, carrying two torches, and they handed it over to the two of them, then started pushing them towards the entrance. Lan SiZhui tripped and almost fell. At that, Wei WuXian cried out and was there in a second.

“I’ll carry it!” He took it over from Lan SiZhui.

“Wei WuXian, didn’t I tell you already?!” Wen Chao frowned at him. “Leave him!”

“Young Master Wen, it is purely out of selfish reasons I take over. You see, Lan SiZhui’s leg is badly broken, he can hardly walk. He’d slow us all down and with tripping around like that, he’d end up setting something on fire. We wouldn’t want it to be the lady, would we?”

“Fine!” Wen Chao rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Let’s go!” Wei WuXian shared a look with Lan WangJi and smiled, then sent a tight, apologetic smile to Lan SiZhui as well. Lan SiZhui bowed to him in thanks. Wei WuXian patted his shoulder as him and Lan WangJi entered the cave.

There was barely a path to walk on as they went deeper and deeper inside the cave. The air inside was humid and stuffy. Stale. Cultivators tripped on the rocks. One of the Jin disciples almost fell off a cliff, which resulted in a smaller commotion at the front. They moved on after a pause, when Lan SiZhui heard Wen Chao’s voice but couldn’t understand the words. They came to another stop soon. Everyone was looking around in various states of alarm.

Someone cried out. Lan SiZhui found the voice familiar, so he forced himself to push his way to the front. Guards were tying ropes on rocks and throwing them over a cliff. It seemed bottomless from where Lan SiZhui stood.

“Down, all of you, or I’ll throw you down as well!” Wen Chao ordered and slowly, the disciples started climbing down. Not seeing Lan WangJi or Jiang WanYin, or even Wei WuXian or Jin ZiXuan, Lan SiZhui took a rope as well.

Thankfully, it wasn’t a difficult descend, once he figured out he could use only one leg and let himself down with his arms. Arriving to the bottom of the cliff, he sighed in relief upon seeing the Young Masters standing around.

“You were kicked down too?” He heard Wei WuXian ask his brother and his eyes widened. Kicked down?!

“Young Master Wei, are you alright?” Lan SiZhui asked as he stepped closer. Wei WuXian frowned at him.

“Lan SiZhui, why did you come down after us?”

“Are you stupid?! If he didn’t come, he’d have been surely kicked down, too.” Jiang Cheng said.

“Like you were?” Wei WuXian teased.

“Stop joking around. We climbed down, of course.”

“Really? For me?” Wei WuXian put a hand on his chest.

“Yes. We were just worried that the monster ate you, it might bring shame to our Sect.” Jiang Cheng scoffed. Wei WuXian huffed, amused.

“Jiang Cheng, that’s so nice of you. I understand why you lot were worried...” He rubbed his chin, turning to Jin ZiXuan. “But you can't be afraid that I was eaten up as well, can you?” He teased. Jin ZiXuan looked away.

“I would rather come down to fight that monster than see that mean couple insult us.” Wei WuXian smiled a genuine smile at Young Master Jin. Lan SiZhui wondered if they were friends at this time. Before they could keep conversing, there was a yell from above:

“Hey! Anything unusual?” The Young Masters shared a look, more than one of them rolling their eyes. Wei WuXian drew in a breath to answer, then at Wen Chao’s next words, he closed his mouth. “Hey! Are you all dead already?” It brought a look on Wei WuXian’s face Lan SiZhui knew well – he was about to get into mischief. He lifted a finger to his mouth, then gestured them to go forward in the cave quietly. Around Lan SiZhui, several disciples grinned as well, nodding eagerly. Everyone liked the plan to play dead. “How can you be as silent as the dead?”

There was a long pause while they moved along the cave. Wei WuXian’s clever plan came to a pitiful fail as they ended up in a chamber with a pond in the middle of it and no other way out. He sighed, disappointed.

“Anyone who's still alive should respond immediately! Or I'll make you suffer!” They heard from behind them.

“Listen to the echoes.” Wei WuXian said. They did. The chamber sounded enclosed, no signs of the sound escaping. “We are hundreds of meters away from them, but we can still hear every word.” He said.

“Something isn’t right.” Lan WangJi nodded.

“What kind of stone is this?” Wei WuXian asked, nodding towards the walls. A disciple went over and touched it. Turning back, he reported:

“It is smooth to the touch, but has many small holes in it.” Wei WuXian seemed to fall in thought, rubbing his chin.

“Young Master, what does that mean?” Someone asked.

“It means that the cave only has this chamber to it, while the porous nature of the rock suggests there should be at least some smaller ones nearby. The sound is enclosed, there is no other way it can carry, only this way.” Lan SiZhui explained. “By that logic, this cave is not a natural one. But since it is too large to have been carved out by men, it indicates the size of the monster we’re facing.”

“Exactly.” Wei WuXian nodded, not looking at Lan SiZhui. “But I cannot see it here.” He drew a charm into the air then activated it. It flew around the chamber, but it only illuminated rocks and water, nothing else.

“The monster is hiding?” Asked someone from the crowd. Before they could continue, Wen Chao and his men arrived.

“Young Master, it's a dead end.” Wen Chao’s lady friend whined.

“Impossible. Keep searching carefully.” He ordered. After the guards agreed and scattered, he turned to the remaining ones. “You guys have somebody hung and bleeding to lure that thing out.”

“Nonsense! Luring that thing with flesh and blood means leaving us to die!” Jin ZiXuan snapped.

“What?” Wen Chao scoffed at him. “Young Master Jin, do you want to try it yourself? To make an example for us?”

“You—”

“Young Master!” A female disciple stepped forward, grabbing a hold of Jin ZiXuan’s arm. It seemed to grab Wen Chao’s lady’s attention and she stepped forward with a sneer.

“If I may suggest, how about her?” She asked meanly, eying the female disciple.

“Her? Maybe another one.” Wen Chao hummed. Lan SiZhui ignored their argument, turning his attention to the water instead, years of training preventing him to ignore the lurking danger. He stepped closer to the water. Whatever creature it was, it had to be hiding in the water. But then, was it a water monster or one that only hid there?

“Step aside!” A sudden movement and the cry pulled his attention away and he looked in alarm as Lan WangJi and Jin ZiXuan stood in front of the female cultivator, covering her from Wen Chao’s men.

“Don't you understand the human language? Or are you playing hero here?” Wen Chao tilted his head to the side.



“Enough! You used us as your dogs. Now you want to use us as your bait.” Jin ZiXuan glared.

“You want to rebel? I'm warning you. I've been putting up with you for long. You better tie the girl up yourself here and now, or all of you people from whatever Sect won't be able to return!” He looked over the disciples. There was a tense moment of silence, then three Jin disciples suddenly attached her!

One of them was near Lan SiZhui, aiming a strike at the woman when Lan WangJi stepped in the line of his attack, to fend off another disciple. Lan SiZhui moved with practice, even though pain made him grit his teeth, he fended off the attack before it could reach Lan WangJi. Their shoulders bumped as the disciples were all defeated. Jin ZiXuan sneered at the one he blocked.

“It's such a shame that disciples like you are from the Jin Sect. How disgraceful!”

“Rebels. You rebels.” Wen Chao fumed. “Attack!” He ordered and his soldiers did so. Before Lan SiZhui could start fighting though, there was a push, then he was out of the battlefield, pushed away by Lan WangJi. He was about to go back and fight when someone grabbed his arm and pulled him back. It was Lady Wen.

“Lady Wen, please let me go, I—”

“I know what you want to do.” She said quietly. “You want to injure yourself even more, don't you.” She glared at him. “You fool!” She tugged on his arm.

“Lady Wen, Second Young Master Lan—”

“Look!” She said, and Lan SiZhui turned to where she was looking. It was Lan WangJi, standing straight as always. As the guards attacked him, he fended them off without ever moving from his position! “He can take care of himself better than you! Stay out of it!”

“Lady Wen...”

“What? Just because you're my cousin I care about you?! Don't be a fool! You're injured and I'm a doctor. What, you think I'd let Second Young Master Lan fight if I didn't know he'd be alright after this?” Lan SiZhui looked down, a blush creeping up his cheeks. So, Lady Wen didn't think he was a good fighter? “Don't be like that.” She said somewhat softer as her grip loosened on his arm and she looked into the battle, not at him. “I've been watching you ever since we've met on that mountain. I've seen you practice with a sword. You use your feet too much, like those Jiang disciples. Who taught you? You'd think whoever was your teacher, he was from Yunmeng.”

“I didn't notice.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. “Lady Wen you don't think the YunmengJiang sword technique is effective?”

“Of course, it is.” She scoffed. “Just look at them! Their style is ruthless and energetic. The YunmengJiang sword technique is one that relies on martial arts, not on the sword itself. Even if they didn't have one, they'd still end more soldiers than most disciples here. The Lan

technique relies more on upper-body and sword wielding. You combine the two and because of that, you use your legs too much when you fight. If I let you fight now, you'd break your leg all over again."

"Lady Wen is very nice to look out for me, but she shouldn't associate with me."

"Shut up! Haven't I told you? I'm a doctor. I won't be responsible for caring for you when this is over."

"I don't think we'll be returning to the Nightless City after this." Lan SiZhui mentioned.

"Well then, whoever ends up being your doctor, don't cause them even more trouble before they heal you!" Lan SiZhui didn't have an answer to that, so he looked down. Eventually, Wei WuXian's voice drifted over the sounds of fighting.

"Those who count on their Sects and do evil at will shall all be executed. Not only executed but also decapitated and reviled by the people to warn future generations."

"*Quintessence of the Wen Sect?*" Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

"How dare you say such outrageous bullshit!" Lan SiZhui's eyes widened at Wen Chao's exclamation. Did he just insult his own Sect's principles?! Wei WuXian's laugh made more than one disciple look over.

"Outrageous? Bullshit? Aren't you talking about yourself?" Wei WuXian asked hysterically. Lan SiZhui and Lady Wen shared a look. "Didn't you know who said that sentence? That's clearly written in your Sect's *Quintessence of the Wen Sect*. That was said by your ancestor, the great, great, great gentry, Wen Mao. You shouldn't have called your ancestor's words outrageous bullshit."

He then started clapping, and Lan SiZhui tried to repress a grin as he was reminded the first time he'd met Senior Wei after he came back to life in Mo XuanYu's body. The performance was the same. "Good. Beautiful! Bravo! Excellent! Brilliant!" He shouted over the fighting disciples. He turned back to Wen Chao, then said something to him quiet enough that they heard his voice but didn't understand his words.

"Wei WuXian!" Wen Chao cried at whatever Wei WuXian said to him and unsheathed his sword. Lan SiZhui was ready to rush to his defense, but Lady Wen pulled him back forcefully. Without any strength in his left leg, Lan SiZhui had no choice but stay by her. Wei WuXian handled it well anyways, dodging Wen Chao's swipes and then held him at sword point before jumping over with him at the rock that stood out in the middle of the water.

"Stop there!" Wei WuXian called out as he turned towards the battle with his sword pressed against Wen Chao's throat. The fight quieted. Lady Wen let go of Lan SiZhui, but didn't move away. Lan SiZhui stayed as well. "Don't move, or I'll spill some of your Young Master's blood."

"Stop! Wei WuXian! Release him!" Wen Chao's lady's shrill voice called out.

“Don't move! Listen to Young Master Wei.” Wen Chao said. Lady Wen pressed her lips together next to Lan SiZhui and stepped closer to the water.

“Wei WuXian. Don't act rashly. Everybody, put down your weapons.” She ordered snappily. Wei WuXian made a confused face at Lan SiZhui, who, in lack of answers, did as Lan JingYi often did when faced a situation he didn't understand, and shrugged his shoulders. Wei WuXian looked even more taken aback by that, but then Wen ZhuLiu moved and Wei WuXian's attention was drawn away by him.

“Core-Melting Hand. Don't move now!” Wen ZhuLiu stopped. “You should be familiar with your Sect Leader. Your Young Master is at my mercy. If he bleeds even one drop, everyone here, including you, won't get away with this.” After a long moment, Wen ZhuLiu finally sheathed his sword. Lady Wen glanced at Lan SiZhui and Lan SiZhui nodded his thanks for her stepping up.

Suddenly, in the otherwise silent cave, sounds of water moving around could be heard and Wei WuXian stumbled on the rock he stood.

“Jiang Cheng! Is it an earthquake?!” He asked alarmed.

“It's underneath you!” Lan SiZhui realized.

“What?” Wei WuXian looked around, confused.

“It's not an earthquake!” Jiang Cheng said. He sounded frightened. “There's something beneath you!”

“Huh?”

But before Lan SiZhui could explain what he suspected about the monster they were hunting hiding in the water, a creature emerged from the water!

It had a long neck, like a snake's, its head shaped like one as well. Except instead of a forked tongue, its mouth was full of long, thin and sharp teeth, one as long as a man's whole leg! It slithered around, nostrils moving as it smelled the air, eyes unmoving. It tilted its head this way and that.

“Tortoise of Slaughter.” Lan SiZhui whispered to himself. Lady Wen grabbed his arm, pulling him back from the water. At the shuffling, Lan WangJi soundlessly jumped over, taking hold of Lan SiZhui's arm as well. Jiang Cheng shuffled closer to them as well, and with it closer to Wei WuXian, still on the rock – or shell. Jiang Cheng's hold on the Wen blade tightened and he drew in a breath, but then Lan WangJi whispered:

“Quiet! Its vision is bad. If we don't make a sound, it won't attack us.”

“It'll attack Wei WuXian instead!” Jiang Cheng also whispered. The snake-like head turned to them and he readjusted his grip on the sword but didn't attack.

The Tortoise leaned closer to them, but the movement jostled its shell. Wei WuXian adjusted his stand on it, which drew its attention away from those on the shore. Lan SiZhui watched,

unable to help and hating the feeling. Wei WuXian still had the sword against Wen Chao's throat, but it was obvious he left it there frozen in fear, not out of threat. His other hand was holding Wen Chao's mouth closed. As the Tortoise leaned even closer, his grip tightened on both, jaw clenching. Jiang Cheng hissed in a breath, his back tensing impossibly further.

Lan SiZhui could see from the drop of his shoulders and how he closed his eyes, that Wei WuXian released his fear in the face of the monster. Maybe ready to die, maybe ready to fight, maybe just calming himself so the Tortoise wouldn't notice the two on his back. Then Wen Chao reached up and tore Wei WuXian's hand off his mouth.

"Save me! Wen ZhuLiu!" He cried out. Wei WuXian scoffed. He released Wen Chao and kicked him to shore, readying his sword.

"Asshole." Jiang Cheng groaned at Wen Chao and readied his sword as well. For a minute, the Tortoise seemed hesitant, confused as to which sounds it should pay attention to, then it turned to Wei WuXian on its back. "Wei WuXian!" Jiang Cheng called out just as the creature attacked.

His shout took its attention away enough that Wei WuXian could push its head away, then it turned towards those on shore. At the attention of the creature on them, the soldiers picked up their bows and arrows, shooting at it, which drove the Tortoise's attention on them instead of Jiang Cheng.

"Come here, before it decides you're the easier prey!" Jiang Cheng called out and Wei WuXian joined them on the shore. "We should escape while we can!" Jiang Cheng said as he grabbed hold of Wei WuXian's arm. Just then the creature picked up a Wen guard and a Jin disciple, shaking them and killing them before hurling them into the water.

"The monster doesn't pick sides!" Wei WuXian told Jiang Cheng. "Our disciples are in danger!" They looked where some Jiang disciples were indeed trapped amongst the Wen and some Jin disciples as well. Jiang Cheng set his jaw and let go of Wei WuXian to rush to their defense.

It was chaos for a while, Jiang, Jin and Wen disciples running around, trying to fight off the creature that restlessly attacked. Lan WangJi joined the fight not long after Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng had, and Lan SiZhui wanted to rush there as well, but Lady Wen was still holding him back.

"Help!" The feminine cry came from behind them and Lan SiZhui and Lady Wen turned at the same time towards where some guards were holding the female Jin disciple by the arm, Wen Chao's lady friend approaching her with a red-hot branding iron. Lady Wen let go of Lan SiZhui's arm and pulled out some silver needles from her belt, but before she could act, three arrows flew towards the group, one into each Wen guard's neck, one into Wen Chao's lady's arm. Before Lan SiZhui could rush over, Lady Wen held out her hand, stopping him. Wen Chao's lady snarled and turned towards Wei WuXian, who was holding a bow directed at them.

The lady cried out, frustrated, her arm bleeding and she turned back to the female disciple. Wei WuXian ran over, throwing himself between the lady's red-hot iron and the female

disciple just in time – the iron was knocked aside, the lady hit to the ground with Wei WuXian's bow. He grabbed the female disciple's hand behind his back, his other arm holding into the front of his robes on the left side of his chest above his heart as he, too, snarled.

“JiaoJiao!” Wen Chao cried out from somewhere, and two guards rushed up to the lady, helping her stand. She sneered at Wei WuXian even as she was taken back to Wen Chao, who, Lan SiZhui noticed, was hiding behind a large rock near the entrance of the cave. “Doctor! Where is that healer?!” Wen Chao cried out. Lan SiZhui looked at Lady Wen, who set her jaw, straightened her back, raised her chin. Without looking at him, she said:

“Don't die here, cousin.”

“Lady Wen. You're going to help them?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. She scoffed.

“How many times do I have to tell you?! I'm a doctor. Do I care about sides and enemies? My job is to heal anyone who needs it. Here.” She took something from her sleeve pocket and threw it over her shoulder. Lan SiZhui caught the little bag of herbs. “Apply it externally.”

“Thank you, Lady Wen. You are a good person.” Lady Wen just huffed, then stormed away in a flurry of bright red robes. Lan SiZhui rushed over to Wei WuXian as fast as he could. He'd let go of the female disciple, who was crouching near a rock, sobbing quietly. Wei WuXian looked at Lan SiZhui, his lips pressed together tightly. Looking down, Lan SiZhui saw the front of his robes had been scorched by the branding iron, right above his heart. He held out the bag of herbs.

“What is that?” Wei WuXian drawled, as if he wasn't hurt at all.

“Medicine.” Lan SiZhui said. Wei WuXian took the bag with a skeptical look. With his hands free, Lan SiZhui wasn't sure what to do.

“Lan SiZhui. Look after MianMian.” Wei WuXian said as he slipped the bag into his robes and picked up the bow he previously held.

“Young Master Wei—”

“You're in no shape to fight. Go back to the entrance. We'll follow soon.” Wei WuXian nodded to him. Lan SiZhui accepted that his help was not needed at this time. He turned to the female cultivator and sensed Wei WuXian go past him behind him.

“Lady. I am Lan SiZhui from the Lan Sect of Gusu. Can you stand?” She nodded and stood. She bowed to him.

“I am Luo QingYang of the Jin Sect of Lanling.” She said.

“Lady Luo, we should follow Young Master Wei's advice and go back to the entrance.” She nodded. The Wen had already left, Lan SiZhui noted to himself. With his slow pace, by the time they reached the bottom of the cliff where they've entered, the others had caught up with them as well. Wei WuXian ran up to him, clasping him on the shoulder.

“Lan SiZhui. What’s the matter, why haven’t you left yet?”

“Shameless bastards.” Came Jin ZiXuan’s voice from where he was examining the ropes with Lady Luo. “They cut all the ropes.”

“The Wen Sect did this?” Lady Luo asked faintly.

“Who else could it be?” Jin ZiXuan fumed. Lan SiZhui turned to Wei WuXian, whose other side now Lan WangJi also appeared.

“Without our swords what can we do?” Someone asked, panicked. That started a flurry of panicked conversations. Someone said their parents would come for them, another told him the Wen Sect would lie about where they were. Lan SiZhui ignored them as he turned back towards the chamber.

He heard the stories about the Tortoise of Slaughter. The first time he heard about it was from a brother, who told them one night that he heard Hanguang-Jun killed it with a good friend of his. Lan SiZhui had just been taken away for his official training and him and the other disciples sat around the dormitories and shared different stories about their parents’ accomplishments.

When they turned to Lan SiZhui, his turn to tell tales, Lan SiZhui admitted his father was so humble he never talked about his accomplishments. A brother said he knew a story of Hanguang-Jun’s and shared with them instead of Lan SiZhui telling his own tale.

He didn’t think much about the story until he got older and started going on night-hunts. He hadn’t heard many stories about the YiLing Patriarch in Gusu, because he was not supposed to listen to gossip and people there didn’t like to talk about the Wen war all that much. But once he was let out into the large world, traveled farther than ever before, he heard the tales of his many accomplishments.

One of them had been how before he gained his title, Wei WuXian defeated the Tortoise of Slaughter. Lan JingYi was quick to shut the person who told them down, saying it was Hanguang-Jun, but it didn’t take a genius to put together that a good friend of Hanguang-Jun’s had been there when the monster fell and Wei WuXian was also there, it had to be him, who was said good friend.

At the time, he was confused – wasn’t Wei WuXian the YiLing patriarch, that awful man everyone hated? How could he have been Hanguang-Jun’s good friend? Then he decided it was a time he did not live through, therefore he had no evidence to judge Wei WuXian’s character. It was probably why he never cared when it had been exposed in Koi Tower that he’d come back from the dead. To him, that man was a stranger, and it didn’t matter what people said about him, he just had to see for himself whether Wei WuXian was a bad man or not. He wasn’t, and later, it was also made official as well.

Anyhow, the tales never detailed how the two men defeated the monster. It was said that it happened during the Wen Indoctrination, that the other disciples escaped and Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian had stayed in the cave for more than seven days before they were freed by the

Jin Sect. By then, the Tortoise had been killed and all the two men said about their victory was that they'd done it together.

While the others were too occupied arguing and panicking, Lan SiZhui started towards the pond again. The tales also didn't say how the other disciples escaped, but he highly doubted they just climbed up the cliff, or else Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian would've escaped as well. There had to be another way around. Another exit they didn't notice. As he edged towards the chamber, he noted with great relief that the monster had gone back to the water, probably feasting on those who had fallen. The bodies they'd left behind were gone now.

He silently activated an illumination spell and guided it around the chamber, in hopes he noticed some sort of crack or hole in the rock. There was nothing. The creature had carved out the chamber for itself, but nothing else. The water was also undisturbed, still, indicating no underwater caves... although, there was an underwater current, he noticed as he watched a piece of talisman paper, from probably a fallen disciple, floating in the water.

Was it only the creature's body that caused the current? Its heartbeat, if it had one, its breathing, if it breathed at all? No. The piece of paper floated around an area towards the back of the creature. Then he noticed leaves in the water as well, something easily carried inside by the wind, if it wasn't for the shape of it. Lan SiZhui didn't pay much attention to the trees outside, but he was looking at the ground quite fixedly on their way up and in. This didn't look like one he'd seen there.

Lan SiZhui looked around, then leaned down and picked up a sword. He needed something to put his spiritual energy into and the sword was the only one capable of that from the pile of discarded weapons that laid about. His plan was to transfer enough of his energy into the sword to be able to use it as an extension of his senses. He'd heard this was possible, and he'd heard of Wei WuXian doing so in the past, but he'd never tried it.

From what he understood of the crafty trick, this required a couple of things. The first was tight and sure control of his spiritual energy – to be able to transfer just enough to sense the surroundings, but not enough that he lost consciousness. Secondly, that spiritual energy he had to borrow the object had to be returned to the host, which meant the object had to stay intact during the practice. There was enough energy transferred that if it did not return, Lan SiZhui's Golden Core might get damaged. If that happened, he could damage not just his body but his mind as well.

Never having done this before, Lan SiZhui was unsure how much of his spiritual energy this required, nor how to use this technique exactly. He started out small, with a normal amount of spiritual energy that was required to use a spiritual sword. The Wen sword he picked up resisted. Since Lan SiZhui wasn't the original master of the sword, it rejected his spiritual powers, and now, more than ever, Lan SiZhui missed Yingjiu.

Slowly, he fed more and more of his energy into the sword, and he felt it give way, let him take control of the sword. It felt wrong, to transfer so much spiritual energy into the sword and not release it, but he resisted the urge and kept feeding it. After a short amount of time, he finally sensed something other than just the sword. He became aware of the warmth where he was holding the sword, of the gentle sway of air as he breathed onto it. It felt like his Golden Core was exhausted, but at the same time, it felt like the sword in his hand hummed

with his own consciousness. It was the strangest double sensation Lan SiZhui had ever experienced.

Feeling like this was enough to feel out the exit he was looking for, he directed the sword with his spiritual energy. At first, it felt clumsy – for one, it was a stranger’s sword, so he missed the familiar energies of Yingjiu; secondly, he was not practiced in the technique. It felt like his body was the sword, but at the same time he felt his real body as well. He made some movements to experiment, then he directed the sword into the water with familiar mental movements.

As the sword entered the water, he felt cold and wet, but at the same time, he also felt his own body dry and on solid land. He guided the sword around the water, letting some spiritual awareness seep out of it to sense the surface around the pond. He frowned as he felt unstable surface, like leaves covering the ground at fall, there were things covering the bottom of the pond. He found the current he was looking for and started carefully following it...

Then suddenly something touched him!

Not the sword, but his physical body, but with his own flinch, the sword also startled, since his consciousness was in it as well. He resisted his first instinct, which was to aim the sword at whoever touched him. He managed to open his eyes with difficulty. Wei WuXian stood at his elbow, glaring at him with wide eyes. He drew in a deep breath and released his tight hold on the sword. He felt it floating in the water, not able to concentrate on controlling it while focusing on Wei WuXian at the same time.

“Lan SiZhui what are you doing? Come on, come back!” Wei WuXian whispered so lowly even Lan SiZhui could hardly make out his words. He shook his head silently, then straightened up and returned to position.

“Wei WuXian!” Jiang Cheng whisper-shouted behind them. “What is he doing?”

“Something with spiritual energy!” Wei WuXian whisper-shouted back.

“Quiet.” He heard Lan Wangji’s even tone. He didn’t lower his voice like they did, but it was low enough as is. “Let him concentrate.”

Lan SiZhui closed his eyes. Wei WuXian was still holding him, but he ignored that and felt out the sword again. He had to find the current again, then he guided the sword through it, leading it further and further down, and there, there was a crack, just wide enough...

Snap!

Something jostled the sword suddenly, and Lan SiZhui, without thinking, jumped away from it. The sword moved but his body did as well, and he could only thank Wei WuXian for grabbing him and dragging him away from the water. They barely hid before the Tortoise emerged from the water, growling lowly and sniffing the air. Lan SiZhui’s heart pounded.

“What have you found?”



“Is there a way out?”

“Can we leave safely?”

“Quiet.” Lan WangJi ordered to the people around them. Wei WuXian let go of his arms, then there were two hands on each of his shoulders. Lan SiZhui was frozen for a long time. He felt the sword floating, waiting for his commands, but he had a hard time concentrating back on it, with his body also needed to focus on the people around him.

“Lan SiZhui, don’t pay us attention.” Wei WuXian said as he squeezed his shoulders. “I think I know what you’re doing. If I’m right, it’s crucial that you listen to me, alright?” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer, just closed his eyes. “Good. Go back to the item. The monster is out. You have to avoid it. Guide it slowly back towards the shore. As soon as it’s safely out of the water, call it back to yourself.”

Lan SiZhui did as he was instructed, guiding the sword in a wide circle around the Tortoise, bringing it out of the water. As soon as it was safe from danger, he called it towards himself suddenly desperate to have his spiritual energy back. He didn’t even think about what the item was, he just wanted the spiritual energy back, so it caught him by surprise when an alarmed cry sounded, then someone caught the sword by the hilt, holding it tight.

“Here.” Lan WangJi said, and soon there was a sword hilt pressed into his hands.

“Alright. Just as you fed the spiritual energy into it, call it back. Pull it into yourself again. Don’t release any of it. That’s it.” Lan SiZhui reabsorbed the energy. Then he sighed, content to feel like himself again, and slumped his back against a tall rock. He opened his eyes to find Wei WuXian looking into his face. Seeing him open his eyes, his former adoptive father grinned at him. “Look at you, using crafty tricks.” He patted Lan SiZhui’s shoulder where he was holding him, then took a step back.

“Where have you learned that?” Jiang Cheng frowned at him. “I’ve only seen Wei WuXian do that before.”

“He—My former adoptive father did it a lot as well.” Lan SiZhui smiled tightly. “I’ve never practiced it before though.”

“It’s a good thing I was here then.” Wei WuXian nodded. “When the monster jostled your sword, you could’ve lost that spiritual power. You could’ve ended up in a coma for the rest of your life.”

“I won’t do it again.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Now, now, I didn’t say that. It’s all in practice.” Wei WuXian said with a mischievous expression. Lan SiZhui frowned and shook his head.

“It didn’t feel right.” He rubbed at his chest. “I won’t do it again.” Wei WuXian sighed disappointed and looked away, pouting.

“Have you found the exit?” Lan WangJi asked after a pause. Lan SiZhui noticed he was propped up against a rock and everyone was gathered around. He pushed himself off to stand properly and nodded.

“How big is it?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Enough to fit five or six people through at a time.”

“Where is it? I couldn’t see an exit the last time we looked around.” He frowned.

“It is underwater. It’s near the monster but far enough that if…” He trailed off.

“If?” Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows encouragingly.

“If someone stays and keeps the monster’s attention on the shore, the others could easily escape.”

“Don’t even think about it being you!” Jiang Cheng snapped even though Lan SiZhui didn’t even indicate he was thinking about it. “You’re too injured. It would eat you in a minute.”

“Well then, I’ll stay.” Wei WuXian nodded seriously.

“What’s with the three of you and your hero complex?!” Jiang Cheng glared at the two Lan and Wei WuXian.

“Young Master Jiang, isn’t it hypocritical of you to say if you’re the one who intends on staying?” Lan SiZhui asked before thinking about *what* he was saying. Once it registered, his eyes widened, but Jiang Cheng didn’t seem offended, just huffed, annoyed.

“Who said I was going to stay?!” He snapped. “I don’t want to get killed like you apparently do.”

“Jiang Cheng, it should be someone with high cultivation staying to keep the monster’s attention. And you can’t stay either, because you’re the best swimmer out of all of us. You’re the only one who could lead them out of here without a problem.” Wei WuXian reasoned. “It is only logical that I stay. Lan Zhan is injured, so is Lan SiZhui.”

“So are you.” Lan WangJi said. Wei WuXian looked down and with a chuckle, rubbed over the burn on his chest.

“Lan Zhan, this little wound? It’s nothing. It doesn’t affect my movements, like yours and Lan SiZhui’s does.”

“I’m uninjured and my cultivation is high.” Jin ZiXuan inserted with a tone that suggested he was doing them a favor by pointing it out.

“Young Master Jin, while it’s very valiant of you to offer, with the highest respect towards the Jin Sect of Lanling, you’re still not of age.” Lan SiZhui said with an apologetic bow.

“I can fight just like the four of you.” Jin ZiXuan glared at him, offended.

“Young Master Jin. The disciple Jin Ling is my cousin by association. You know his temper well. He would actually kill me if I left you here.” Lan SiZhui smiled tightly.

“He could! I heard once he stabbed Wei WuXian.” A Jin disciple inserted.

“Stabbed me?!” Wei WuXian glared at the disciple. “I’ve never met him before the lectures! And I’d have remembered if I got stabbed by a temperamental Jin disciple!” With that the disciple lowered his eyes, accepting he was hearing false gossip. In contrast, Lan WangJi’s eyes flashed sharply at Lan SiZhui. He lowered his own eyes in shame. Even though it was not a lie, the incident, indeed, hadn’t happened yet, therefore it wasn’t true at this time. In Lan WangJi’s eye, it was another strike on Lan SiZhui’s record.

“Anyways, Lan SiZhui is right.” Wei WuXian continued. “Jin ZiXuan is still just fifteen. He is a junior, and I know!” He held up a hand towards Lan SiZhui. “That he’s the highest ranking in his Sect at this place, but that doesn’t mean he’s up to the task at all.”

“It is decided then?” Someone asked nervously. “Young Master Wei will stay while we escape.”

“Then he follows us right away!” Jiang Cheng ordered harshly. “I’ll not leave you behind.” He glared at Wei WuXian, who smiled tightly at him and patted his shoulder.

“Alright.” Wei WuXian turned and faced the disciples. “Everyone, listen up! Follow Jiang Cheng and Lan SiZhui to get through the hole while I distract the creature. Those who are healthy, carry the injured. Those who can swim, carry those who can’t. Five or six people at a time. Don’t rush it.”

“Young Master Wei, how are you going to distract the creature?” Lan SiZhui asked, the thought just occurring to him.

“Lan SiZhui, I have a plan, don’t worry.” Wei WuXian patted his shoulder. “Is everyone ready?” Sounds of agreement came from all sides. “On my mark then.” He nodded to them, then they all neared the entrance of the chamber. The Tortoise was still out, growling and looking around, sniffing at discarded weapons.

Wei WuXian picked up a torch nearby. He sneaked up to a boulder that still hid him then he looked back, nodding to them. As soon as the disciples started moving, he came out of his hiding spot and drew a charm in the air, strengthening the torch’s flame, making it bigger and threw it near the monster, which snapped at it, sniffed it curiously. The disciples neared a shallow part of the pond and Jiang Cheng ushered everyone inside before grabbing into Lady Luo.

“Help Lan SiZhui.” He whispered to her and she nodded. Where their eyes met, Jiang Cheng looked determined and Lan SiZhui realized he was not going to listen to his brother, but stay and bring out Wei WuXian, whether he wanted or not. Lan SiZhui nodded, then with Lady Luo’s help he entered the pond. The water was cold but not as cold as the water in the Cloud Recesses’ lakes and streams, so he wasn’t bothered by it, while others shivered as they dove in.

Lan SiZhui led them towards where the entering was, only half paying attention to Wei WuXian as he activated fire charm after fire charm. Once they were above the hole, Lan SiZhui drew in a breath.

He wasn't the best swimmer, never fond of the water, actually. He was often seasick on lakes as well, though rivers didn't jostle his stomach quite as much. But because of that, he didn't like swimming much, and while it was required of every GusuLan disciple to learn in order not to drown in the mountains' lakes and rivers, he never practiced much. He found it challenging to swim downwards, not quite getting the hang of it.

Lady Luo wasn't a much better swimmer than him, but it seemed the Jiang disciples were quite good, surpassing all of them and helping them near the bottom, pushing them through the hole if someone couldn't get in, like Lan SiZhui. His lungs burned as they swam through the short tunnel, then light surrounded them and everyone headed up, towards the surface.

Lan SiZhui gasped for air. His leg was agonizing him. There was a deep throb and a sharp pain, the two mixing in a torturous, constant pain that didn't go away. He didn't even realize he was sinking back underwater so many times, Lady Luo attempting on pulling him up but too weak. Then strong hands grabbed him under the arm and he was pulled on someone's back and swam out, then pushed on shore.

Not having to use his leg anymore to hold himself up, he turned to the side and threw up, mostly water, but whatever was in his stomach left him as well, and more.

"We have to go back! Why did you push me?!" Jiang Cheng's voice was way too close, being the one who pulled Lan SiZhui out, he was lying next to him. Then he got his legs under him and stood, dripping water onto Lan SiZhui.

"You'd have gotten killed if you stayed." Jin ZiXuan's even voice said above him.

"We left them there! You left them there!"

"I didn't leave you. Shouldn't you be grateful?"

"Well, then, thank you for leaving my brother to his death!" Jiang Cheng screamed. "I'll go back to them. Don't even think about stopping me, or I'll strangle you with my own hands!" Jiang Cheng stepped into the lake and seeing that, Lan SiZhui sat up, intending on going back with him, but then Lady Luo was there, holding his shoulders, holding him back. Before Jiang Cheng had the chance to dive in, there was a rumble. There was a pause, then Jiang Cheng dove underwater.

"Young Master Jiang!" multiple voices called out, then there was silence for a few minutes.

"He's been down there for so long..." Lady Luo said quietly. "Do you think he got back inside?"

"*You!*" Jin ZiXuan called out behind them. "Go after your Young Master, see how he is!"

“Yes!” Someone called out, then a Jiang disciple dove in as well. After another long wait, there was a splash and two gasps of air, one desperate as the Jiang disciple surfaced with Jiang Cheng.

“Let me back!” Jiang Cheng’s hoarse voice called out, weakly, but he struggled against his disciple’s hold. “I was almost there, if I just moved that rock...!”

“A-Cheng, if you’d have moved that rock, the whole thing would’ve crushed you!” The disciple who was sent after him said. “We won’t be able to get in this way!”

“Then let’s go back to the entrance!”

“We don’t have a rope to go down the cliff!”

“The entrance is blocked by rocks as well!” A new voice said, panting. Someone must’ve gone ahead and checked as soon as they were out of the water. As Lan SiZhui turned, he saw a Jin disciple leaning on his knees as he panted.

“You’re lying!” Jiang Cheng called out, swimming to shore.

“I’m sorry.” The Jin disciple shook his head, eyes pitying.

“We must get help, our Sects will help us.” Lady Luo said.

“Does anyone know which sect is the closest?”

“We’re along the river Huanghe.” Lan SiZhui said. “Since we’ve parted from Qishan we came a great way along it. I suspect we’re closest to Qinghe and Lanling.” He paused. “With the Nie Sect being under Wen siege, we can’t go there.” Once he was done speaking, he bowed his head and rubbed his thigh, his whole leg on fire.

“Let’s go to Lanling then!” Jiang Cheng barked.

“Young Master Jiang, what about those injured?” Someone asked.

“Stay here, wait for the help! I’m faster without you anyways.”

“My father won’t help you.” Jin ZiXuan said. “I’ll come with you.”

“Fine!” Jiang Cheng snapped. “Just let us go already.”

“Young Master Jiang...” Lan SiZhui opened his eyes, looking for the man who stood not far away. Jiang Cheng looked down at him with a frown. “Head towards East. If you follow the river downstream, you’ll soon arrive to Jin territory.” Jiang Cheng nodded his thanks. “And Young Masters...” At that, the two halted and looked at him again. “Please, hurry.” With a nod, they took off.

“Alright, while we wait for their return, we should camp here for the time being. Water is near and the forest thick to hide us from the Wen Sect.” Someone called out.

“Shouldn’t we go after them? We must arrive to Lanling soon as well.”

“Some of the injured need to be cared for.” Lady Luo argued as she stood. “Lan SiZhui, this Jin disciple and those two Jiang disciples are seriously injured.” She pointed out people who were sitting around. “We should set up camp as Hui XiSang said and also look for herbs in the woods.”

“I’m not a healer.” Someone said.

“Me neither!” Lady Luo snapped. “But don’t you recognize basic healing herbs from your studies or when you were also injured?” There were sounds of agreement all around. “You, you and you, gather firewood and start on a fire right away. It is nightfall soon, and our clothes are damp. You and you...” As Lady Luo gave orders, Lan SiZhui let himself, for once, be the party who did nothing just felt self-pity. His leg hurt something awful and he would be lucky if he didn’t lose it, although at this point, he doubted he’d ever walk normally again.

As he looked away, he glanced down and noticed something in the grass beside him. It was the sword from the cave he’d never let go of since he withdrew his spiritual power from it. It was almost like it was a part of him now, always there, unnoticed but stable, like Yingjiu. Except it wasn’t *his* spiritual tool, but some Wen soldier’s who died in the cave.

People went around, busy with whatever task. Lan SiZhui didn’t pay them any attention, looking down at the blade. He looked for a long time, then he picked it up, tracing the characters carved into it, painted in red, which made them stand out from the black-etched blade. He thought they fit the blade perfectly.

*Feixu.*

“Brother Lan, don’t you want to move?” Lady Luo asked. Lan SiZhui looked up, startled to realize the lady crouched down beside him at one point. She gestured at his leg. Looking down, Lan SiZhui noticed his injured one was extended in front of him and it was lapped by the water. He smiled at Lady Luo and shook his head.

“Lady Luo, it’s actually nice, the cold water.” He said quietly. “I actually prefer it.”

“I see.” Lady Luo hummed. Lan SiZhui looked at her and noticed she was shivering slightly.

“But perhaps we should dry before the night falls and it becomes too cold.” Lan SiZhui said and Lady Luo smiled at him gratefully as she helped him up and to the fire that had already been lit. In one hand, Lan SiZhui held the lady’s where she let him lean on her, in the other, he had a black-red sword.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

They saw the Young Masters seven days later. Lan SiZhui spent that time sleeping, being fed plain, thin soup that was made from whatever herbs the others remembered being good for them and lake water. At first, they couldn’t figure out how to boil it, then someone offered their metal waterskin. It left a rusty taste and Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure it was actually good to

drink, not only soup but anything from the waterskin. He kept his concerns to himself, because at nightfall, most disciples cuddled close to warm each other up. He sent Lady Luo away when she offered, because him being a Lan, cold didn't bother him at all.

On the seventh day, early afternoon, there was movement in the bushes. Everyone was lazing around with nothing to do, and even though they've set up patrols, those disciples were also often seen near the camp, slacking. At the rustle of leaves, everyone got alert and Lan SiZhui grabbed Feixu tightly, eyes pinned on the spot. He needn't to worry, because the next moment, Jin ZiXuan and Jiang Cheng appeared.

"Young Master!" Lady Luo cried and the Jin disciples and Jiang disciples bowed to them. Lan SiZhui did his best to also show his respect, but he'd been tightly tucked under some robes the Lady found somewhere – and a Jin disciple was also curiously missing his outer robes – so he could hardly move in the cocoon.

"We've found them." Jiang Cheng said. "They're alive." He looked over at Lan SiZhui, nodding to him. Lan SiZhui let out a breath and untangled himself, but before he could stand, Lady Luo was there, helping him up. He sent her a grateful smile and turned to the Young Masters, bowing.

"Young Master Jin, Young Master Jiang, thank you for saving Second Young Master Lan and Young Master Wei."

"There was not much saving." Jiang Cheng frowned. "By the time we dug them out they'd killed the monster."

"They killed the creature?" Several whispers sounded behind Lan SiZhui. He didn't even try to hide he wasn't surprised, he was too proud. He smiled, looking down at Feixu still in his hand. He flexed his grip on it, then looked up.

"Young Masters. I'd like to go to check on Second Young Master Lan now."

"You should stay. We've brought some healers, they should be along shortly." Jin ZiXuan said.

"I..." Lan SiZhui hesitated, then in the end, said: "While the Jiang Sect had been safe all this time due to Sect Leader Jiang's decision to close the borders and the Jin Sect had cooperated with the Wen Sect, the Lan Sect had suffered great losses. Truth is, there might be very few of us left. I'd like to stay by Second Young Master Lan's side as much as possible." He said quietly. Jiang Cheng sighed and nodded.

"Young Master Jin. I'll take Lan SiZhui back. Would you mind overlooking my disciples until I return?"

"Of course." Jin ZiXuan nodded. Lan SiZhui bowed him in thanks. Him and Jiang Cheng then departed with two Jiang disciples who were unharmed in the fight against the monster.

Arriving to the shore, they were met by the sight of Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian being laid out in the shade. Lan SiZhui rushed – as much as he could – over to Lan WangJi. He quickly

checked his pulse and energy levels. He sighed a relieved sigh, noting his adoptive father was just fine. Reaching over he checked his other adoptive father as well.

He was less fine. He had an infection settling in his body, so while his temperature was fine for now, he'll probably end up with a nasty fever in a few hours. He was clutching a strange sword in his hand, and upon inspecting it, Lan SiZhui found it quite strange. There was also something else strange in his energy levels. It was as if...

Before Lan SiZhui could think about what was so familiar and strange about the sword and Wei WuXian's energy, there was movement under him. He released Wei WuXian to look at Lan WangJi, who was stirring. He blinked twice, then sat up slowly. Lan SiZhui helped him sit up, then someone rushed over with a waterskin. Lan WangJi accepted with a silent nod and managed to drown the whole thing. Once he was done, he looked over to Wei WuXian, sighing quietly in relief when he huffed in sleep and rolled to his side, still cradling the sword.

"Lan SiZhui." Lan WangJi looked over him with a slow blink.

"Second Young Master Lan. How are you feeling?"

"We have some food for you over here." Jiang Cheng inserted from the shore where a fire was going with a cauldron above it.

"Hungry." Lan WangJi nodded to Jiang Cheng, answering Lan SiZhui's question. He helped Lan WangJi up and over to the fire. Once they sat, Jiang Cheng offered a bowl to him as well, which he took gratefully. Once they were done eating, Lan WangJi looked around. "Wen Chao." It was a question, despite the flat tone. Jiang Cheng understood nonetheless.

"Strangely, him and Wen Xu were called away." He said. "Ah, your brother hadn't been found yet." He said as if to reassure, then frowned. "I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad one."

"No news is good news." Was all Lan WangJi said. Jiang Cheng looked away.

"I'm not sure it is in this case. But let's hope for the best." He paused. "Although I didn't have a chance to talk to my father yet, you're both welcome to come back to Yunmeng with us. I'm sure Jin ZiXuan will offer you the same, so if you would like to go to Lanling and meet Jin Ling instead, that's fine."

"Have you..." Lan SiZhui trailed off, unsure if he was too eager. Lan WangJi continued.

"Have you heard of him?"

"We haven't met in Lanling, but I've met a few disciples and asked about him." Jiang Cheng snorted. "He left an impression, that's for sure. But no, apparently, he left some weeks ago, I assume to Gusu and haven't returned. Only a courier had been by who was sent by him, and instructed to give a letter to someone who could take it to Qishan. From how they talked about it, I assume that was the letter Wen Chao had read out loud. Lanling haven't heard of him since. Sorry."



“It’s alright.” Lan SiZhui smiled. “If his letters are to be believed, he’s safe. Although...” He trailed off, biting his lip. He shook his head in the end, not saying anything.

“So, Lanling or Yunmeng?” Jiang Cheng asked as he picked up some vegetables from the broth with a frown, then popped it in his mouth.

“We’ll return to the Cloud Recesses.” Lan Wangji stated.

“What?!” Jiang Cheng glared at them. “Absolutely not!” He snapped.

“Yes.” Lan Wangji said evenly. “With Wen Xu and Wen Chao gone it mustn’t be as reinforced right now. If we go now, we might be able to collect enough familial disciples to chase them out.”

“You cannot be serious.” Jiang Cheng scoffed. “You’re both injured! Besides, how many familial disciples could you gather? At least come back to Yunmeng, ask my father to give you some men!”

“Young Master Jiang, I have a feeling Lotus Pier will need all the strength it can have now.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“Let us go back to Gusu on our own.” Lan Wangji said.

“So you can die as martyrs?!”

“So we can act without raising suspicions and surprising the Wen guards.” Lan Wangji informed him.

“You’re insane, Lan Wangji.” Jiang Cheng frowned at him deeply.

“Sometimes you must think outside the box to win.” He glanced over his shoulder at Wei WuXian briefly. “We’re injured and because of that, nobody expects us to return.”

“And how will you fight without your swords?! You think about that?”

“We have other means to fight.”

“Such as? Inform me, Lan Wangji, because as I see it, you’re about to get yourself killed. Which would be fine, but you also have a disciple to take care of. You can’t just run into danger without thinking of Lan SiZhui. You only have yourselves now. Think about that!”

“Mn. Lan SiZhui can stay if he wishes.”

“Of course, he’ll go with you!” Jiang Cheng threw up his hands. “You can’t ask a Lan to be selfish. He’ll always chose to be by your side, whatever you do. So, don’t put him in danger and stay!”

“Lan SiZhui will turn twenty soon. He is almost a senior disciple. He has to make his own choices. If he chooses to stay by my side, I have to respect that. But I cannot avoid my duties because I want a disciple safe. With that, I’d leave a hundred more in danger.” Jiang Cheng

kept scowling at them, but then he looked over at Lan SiZhui, his eyes dropping to the sword leaned against his knee. He huffed and stood then. Lan SiZhui expected him to just walk away and leave them, but then he returned with a silver and red sheath. He thrust it at Lan SiZhui. He blinked at it, then looked up at Jiang Cheng.

“At least die with some dignity.” He scoffed.

“Thank you, Young Master Jiang.” He bowed his head, then sheathed Feixu. He noted, surprised that the same characters were also carved on the sheath. When did Jiang Cheng see Feixu’s name?

“I’ll escort you to where some Jin disciples are waiting. They have a sword. If Jin GuangShan is to be believed, they’re here for us, so they might take you all the way to Gusu if we ask. If they don’t, then I’ll make sure they at least take you somewhere close.”

“Thank you, Young Master Jiang.” The two Lan bowed to him after standing up. Jiang Cheng huffed.

“Don’t thank me. They’re Jin ZiXuan’s disciples. So, once you’re done with this suicide mission in Gusu, make sure you thank him properly.”

“Mn.” The Jiang disciples stayed behind to look over Wei WuXian, and the two Lan followed Jiang Cheng to where some disciples were waiting.

“They’ll take you to Moling but not further.” Jiang Cheng said, once he’d discussed with the Jin disciples. Lan Wangji bowed his head in thanks. “I’ll try to keep Wei WuXian from rushing after you. If you die, he’ll probably go anyways, so stay alive, yes?” He looked at them sternly. Lan SiZhui looked down and hid his smile behind his sleeve. “What are you laughing at?!” Jiang Cheng swatted him with his own sleeve.

“We’re very touched by Young Master Jiang’s worry.”

“Who’s worried?!” Jiang Cheng huffed, looking away. “Anyways, send word if you succeed, although I assume, we’ll hear about it anyways.”

“Yes.” Lan Wangji bowed to him deeply and headed to the Jin disciples. Lan SiZhui hesitated, and once Lan Wangji was out of hearing range, he turned back to Jiang Cheng.

“Young Master Jiang, if I may make a request.”

“I’m not telling anyone anything in case you die!” Jiang Cheng snapped.

“It’s not that, Young Master Jiang. I wanted to ask you, if Jin Ling appears in Yunmeng looking for me, please accommodate him.”

“Wouldn’t you want me to keep quiet about where you are or something like that?” Jiang Cheng frowned.

“Mn. If he comes to Gusu, I will gladly accept his help rebuilding the Cloud Recesses. It’s not about that. It’s just... Although he’d been to Lanling all this time, I’m sure he didn’t feel

home there. It would be good, even if for a night, he could rest assured that he was somewhere good.”

“I have no idea what that means.” Jiang Cheng frowned at him, then sighed. “But fine. Sure. We can accommodate him as long as you wish.”

“Just as long as we find each other again.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “It will be good to know he’s safe in Lotus Pier.”

“If he comes there.” Jiang Cheng said.

“He will. I’m going now. Take care of yourself and of your own, Young Master Jiang.” He bowed deeply. Jiang Cheng, for once, returned it, then turned and stalked away. Lan SiZhui joined the Jin disciples and Lan Wangji, who watched him curiously. He ignored the look and got on a sword behind a Jin disciple. It was time to return home.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Wen sword: 廢墟 Fèixū: "ruins"

# Pride I.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Returning home had been strange. It didn't bring the same comfort it had so many times for Lan SiZhui in the past. Moling looked the same, but everything had changed. The people were less lively, less welcoming, the atmosphere dark and moody.

After parting from the Jin disciples, they set off to visit the Moling Su Clan. The very same that's leader will become Su She, who will betray not only the Lan Sect, but the whole cultivation world as well. Lan SiZhui wondered why. The Su Clan had many inner disciples in the Cloud Recesses even in Lan SiZhui's time, and they were just as respected as the Lan disciples. The two families had many familial ties as well, Lan JingYi being one of them as well.

Arriving to the Su residence in Moling, Lan SiZhui felt longing for his friend. They've often visited Moling, mainly when they were heading back home from night-hunts, but often by themselves as well, Lan JingYi wanting to welcome a newborn of an old friend or paying respect to his parents, or just see those he grew up with. Moling hadn't been Lan SiZhui's home, but it was Lan JingYi's, and because of that, Lan SiZhui spent almost as much time here as his friend had as well.

Entering the residence, Su disciples who recognized the Second Young Master Lan bowed to them, those who didn't did as well, seeing his elegant nature, understanding he must be an important guest. A senior disciple came to greet them, one Lan SiZhui was sure he'd seen around the Cloud Recesses in the past few months.

"Second Young Master Lan, brother Lan. It is an honor to welcome you to our humble home. Clan Leader Su is in an important meeting with the town elders, but he'd requested we prepare rooms, a bath and some food for you while you wait."

Lan WangJi inclined his head. "It would be most welcome. We'd also like to request healers, if you can spare any."

"I'll go fetch them. Until then, please, follow me." He led them to some separate buildings, away from the main buildings. As they entered, two or three disciples rushed out of the rooms with bags in their hands. Lan SiZhui felt bad for taking over their rooms but upon seeing the tub filled with hot water, he soon forgot about it.

They didn't have to share rooms, so Lan SiZhui bathed alone. His leg was still hurting and the hot water didn't feel good on his bone there, but the rest of his body felt like sinking into soothing essence. He startled awake at the knock on his door, not even having noticed he fell asleep. He quickly exited the tub and picked up some robes that had been laid out on the bed. He shuffled over to the door and opened it.

A servant was there with two, serious looking people, a man with a goatee and a woman with a permanent frown. He bowed to them and gestured them inside. He was instructed to lie on the bed, then the healers started working on him.

The surgery was long, but thankfully, he needn't to be awake for it. He got a mild sedative that would knock him out for an hour, and the last thing he saw before going under had been the glint of a blade. When he woke, his leg was heavily bandaged and stung a little where they probably cut into him. He didn't want to think about it, so he accepted the next vial, which was a painkiller.

The healers then managed to make him some sort of brace they said should help keep his bones in place and they wrapped that up as well. By the time they were finished, his leg was about as thickly bandaged as thick his thigh was.

He was told he could walk around with a cane but shouldn't put weight on his leg for at least two weeks. He accepted their advice, even though he had every intention to fight by Lan WangJi's side, to get the Wen out of his home.

They were received by the Su Clan Leader a few hours later. Lan WangJi looked much better as well. They both changed into Lan Sect robes, probably provided by some Lan disciples who resided here. Lan WangJi looked over him, eyes lingering on the cane, then nodded approvingly before proceeding to the reception hall.

The current Su Clan leader was Su She's older brother, Su MuShi. He was going to die in the Sunshot Campaign and his brother will take over the Clan, his animosity towards the Lan Sect driving him to cut ties with the main Sect. Lan SiZhui bowed to the Clan Leader, who bowed to them in return and with a wide gesture invited them to sit. Lan SiZhui noted with relief that high chairs had been prepared for them instead of the usual low ones. He sat comfortably.

"Second Young Master Lan, welcome to our humble home." The Clan Leader said with a smile. His brother sat across Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi. "You're most welcome to stay as long as you'd like." He said.

"That won't be necessary." Lan WangJi said coldly and Su She frowned at them from the other side of the room. "But we'd like to request you provide us resources to attack and reclaim the Cloud Recesses as soon as possible." The blunt words were uncharacteristic from Lan WangJi, but Lan SiZhui had been doing damage control for Lan JingYi and Jin Ling for so long now, the words came automatically for him.

"We apologize for our bluntness, Clan Leader Su. Thank you for your generous invitation, your kindness will be noted by the Lan Sect in the future. However, Second Young Master Lan is correct. The matter is most pressing, for Grandmaster Lan is injured and possibly our injured brothers are being forced to do labor for the Wen. We'd like to attack before they hear about our return to Lan territory. Please, if you could spare some resources and men for our aid, we'd be most grateful." Lan WangJi, thankfully, didn't glare at him for speaking up, just lowered his eyes.

“Ah, I see, I see.” Su MuShi nodded, petting his goatee. “Of course, Second Young Master Lan has the support of the Moling Su Clan. We’ve been preparing to protect Moling from the invading Wen, for now that they’ve forced the Sects to action or inaction, they’re moving on to the major Clans. I’ve just had a long discussion about the matter with the town elders. We suspected you’d ask for our aid, and so have decided to spare three dozen disciples. One dozen are survivors who fled from Gusu. They’re mostly uninjured as well. And of course, anything else you need, we’ll try to provide.”

“We’ll need to buy some weapons.” Lan WangJi glanced at Lan SiZhui, who nodded.

“Clan Leader Su, do you happen to have a guqin maker in town? Ah, Su BaFeng, if I remember correctly, had been selling his expertly made guqin in Moling, right?”

“Ah, yes, yes, Master Su BaFeng!” Clan Leader Su nodded. “His craft is known around the world. Most GusuLan guqin are made by him. Brother Lan has a very good eye for the craft.”

Guqin, while not classified as spiritual tools, were made to accommodate the user’s spiritual energy, just like a sword would. But while a sword couldn’t be made to be usable for this purpose by anyone, guqin almost always were. Only those who chose it as their spiritual tool choose to have one made specifically for them, one that would only recognize its owner’s spiritual energy, much like swords did.

In the Lan Sect, disciples used generally made guqin until the end of their training, much like Lan SiZhui had been. Once they turned twenty, could they choose it as a spiritual tool and have one made for them personally. Hanguang-Jun had one since he was seventeen. He’d told this to Lan SiZhui when Lan SiZhui decided to practice the guqin. He got *Wangji* before Sunshot Campaign went underway, and only used it once while he was a disciple, but once he turned twenty, it became his permanent companion on night-hunts.

Lan SiZhui suspected he got it from Master Su in order to reclaim Gusu, much like they were doing it now, as well. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or alarmed that despite his presence, the past barely changed.

“We’d need spiritual guqin.” Lan WangJi added. It made sense, without their swords as spiritual weapons, they had very little chance against the Wen.

“We will submit an order right away.” Su MuShi nodded. “Do Young Masters have a preference for names?” Lan WangJi shook his head, but Lan SiZhui said quietly:

“I do.” Ever since Hanguang-Jun had told him about *Wangji*, Lan SiZhui had been thinking of names for his future spiritual guqin. He came up with the name not long ago though, once he’d learned his true identity, he knew right away what he wanted to call his spiritual tool. “Hudie.”

Lan WangJi looked at him curiously, but he just smiled tightly at him. If he was in the future, Hanguang-Jun would understand the name. He felt a pang of regret he couldn’t share this moment with his adoptive father, but he supposed he didn’t have much choice. Somehow, he was in the middle of a war, and luxuries like waiting for a sentimental moment to name his guqin, were not allowed.

“Brother Lan is very sure about that.” Su MuShi smiled at him awkwardly, questioningly. Probably thinking: *‘why would anyone name a guqin after a bug?’*

“I am almost twenty, and I have been practicing the guqin for five years now. I’ve had plenty of time to think about it.” Su MuShi’s face betrayed the thoughts he didn’t voice: *‘And this was the best you could come up with?’* “I admit, it is a bit sentimental. It was the first thing I got when the Lan Sect of Gusu took me in, a straw butterfly. I thought I’d honor my adoptive father this way.”

“Ah, in that case.” Su MuShi inclined his head, embarrassed that he was so disgusted by the name at first. Lan WangJi looked down, not meeting Lan SiZhui’s eyes. “The Su Clan of Moling is honored to gift the two of you your spiritual guqin.”

“Thank you, Clan Leader Su.” The two Lan bowed to him at the same time.

“We’ll hurry the order as much as we can, but I suspect it will be at least a week until it is done. Please, rest here and heal until then. The doctors said brother Lan should be on bedrest as much as possible, so he doesn’t injure his leg permanently.” He addressed Lan SiZhui, who nodded his thanks at the worry. Then something occurred to him and he looked around.

“Clan Leader Su, there is something I’d like to talk to you, which would require the utmost privacy.” He said after a moment. Three pairs of eyes looked at him in curiosity and confusion. “Would you mind if I cast a privacy spell?”

“As you wish.” Su MuShi gestured at him with a concerned expression. Lan SiZhui would prefer if Su She wasn’t here either, but he had no way of asking the man to leave and as far as he knew, in this time he had not yet betrayed the Lan Sect. So, he activated silencing talismans and turned to Su MuShi.

“Clan Leader Su, you must be aware that Sect Leader Lan is currently in hiding.” He started. As soon as the words left his mouth, Lan WangJi also turned to the Clan Leader curiously.

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard.” He nodded, confusion still coloring his face.

“My brother, has he been by?” Lan WangJi asked.

“Here, in Moling?” Clan Leader Su raised his eyebrows.

“My friend is also with him.” Lan SiZhui said. “His name is Lan JingYi. He grew up in Moling, so I assumed they might’ve come here per his idea, to hide from the Wen Sect.”

“Lan JingYi?” Su MuShi frowned, looked over his brother, who shrugged. “I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with the name. Perhaps I know him by his parents?” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and shook his head.

“I didn’t think so. But it was worth to ask.”

“XiChen wouldn’t have risked bringing the Wen Sect to Moling anyhow.” Lan WangJi said after a pause, looking over at Lan SiZhui. “They must be somewhere no one would suspect they’d hide out.”

“Mn. I have my suspicions, but I hope I’m wrong.” Lan SiZhui said. Lan WangJi nodded, seemingly the same thoughts in his mind.

“Where would they hide no one would suspect them? Wen Xu had turned the Lan Sect’s territory upside down, trying to find him, then he moved on to Lanling and Qinghe.”

“If what I suspect is correct, he wouldn’t find him in any of those places.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I’m sorry, but I can’t risk sharing my thoughts. I was just curious if you’ve seen them.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t.” Su MuShi shook his head with an apologetic smile. “Now, it is nearing nighttime. Your dinner will be brought to your rooms shortly.” Lan SiZhui nodded and removed the talismans.

“Thank you, Clan Leader Su.” Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui bowed after they stood, then left.

“Lan SiZhui.” Lan WangJi stopped him before they entered their rooms. “What we’ve just talked about...” Lan WangJi started, but Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I have faith they’re both fine. I know they are.” He said with conviction. Lan WangJi seemed reassured by it, which was strange. He nodded. Before they entered their rooms, doors already open, Lan WangJi spoke up again.

“Straw butterfly?”

“Mn. I was poor at the time, when I met my adoptive father. He saw me eying it and when he realized I couldn’t afford it, bought it for me. I never got a gift before, not that I remember, so it was the nicest thing anyone had done for me, at least at the time I thought.” He chuckled.

“Mn.” Lan WangJi hummed.

“Good night, Second Young Master Lan.”

“Good night, Lan SiZhui.”

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Before they arrived to the past, the closest Lan SiZhui had been to battle and war had been when he’d sat through countless history lessons and read countless history books in the library. He didn’t know how much one needed to prepare for it. Now, standing in Clan Leader Su’s private office, looking at a map and talking strategy, Lan SiZhui wondered if he was even classified to be in the room. Lan WangJi spoke of attack points and defense lines with confidence, and Clan Leader Su was nodding seriously.

Three other disciples were also present, those who were the oldest from the three dozen disciples the Su Clan could spare. The one leading the Lan disciples was named Lan ChenGuang. When Lan SiZhui learned his name, he bowed as deep as he could. Lan ChenGuang seemed the most confused by that.



“Four of Su Tong’s disciples will guard the gates.” Lan WangJi said, pointing out the gates on the map. The Su disciples, who weren’t familiar with the Cloud Recesses, paid rapt attention. “At the walls the rest of Su Tong’s team and Su Huan’s team will occupy them. The Lan disciples move to the main buildings.”

“Young Master Lan, is there a reason you haven’t mentioned the Lan disciples participating the battle at the walls?” Clan Leader Su asked with furrowed brows. It depended on Lan WangJi’s answer whether he should be offended.

“Wuye and Wanjian.” Lan WangJi answered.

“Huh?” Clan Leader made a face at Lan SiZhui.

“Clan Leader Su, I think Second Young Master Lan means we’ll go through the mountains, which are too dangerous to hike by those disciples who do not know them well.” Lan SiZhui said. Lan WangJi nodded.

“Why would you go that way?”

“Attack from two fronts.”

“So, while the disciples at the walls occupy the soldiers, you can sneak in from the main buildings behind and stab them in the back?”

“Mn.”

“Wouldn’t the inner buildings be the most guarded, where they keep the Lan survivors?”

“Mn. The disciples have probably been obedient. They would not expect them to rebel.”

“They wouldn’t be as guarded. You base your strategy on whether your disciples had been compliant.”

“If they weren’t, we still attack from two fronts, just attack two different fronts as well.”

“Hm. And what about escape routes?”

“Su Tong’s disciples guard the gates. Those around the walls can escape that way.”

“That doesn’t leave an escape route for the Lan disciples.”

“If we fail, we die at home.”

“Well, that’s dark.” Su Huan whispered to Su Tong, but since they were in a relatively small room, it could clearly be heard.

“Lan WangJi, Su Huan is right. We’re not sending you there to die.”

“Not intending on dying.” Lan WangJi said with a confident tone. “We will win.”



Hudie was perfect, but Feixu was a strange, unfamiliar weight in Lan SiZhui's hand. Lan WangJi insisted on him bringing it – well, as much as Lan WangJi ever insisted on anything. He was waiting for Lan SiZhui and the other disciples at the gates to the Su residence. Upon Lan SiZhui arriving with his guqin, he looked down at his belt and simply said:

“Bring your sword.” And with that, Lan SiZhui went back to his borrowed rooms, picked up Feixu and went back to the gates, only to receive an approving nod from Lan WangJi.

He was baffled by the blade. It wasn't his, not made to host his spiritual energy, yet when he'd transferred some into it in order to seek out the exit in the cave, he'd carved some space out for himself in the sword, made it so it accepted him as its master, yet it also refused him, knowing he wasn't its owner. He did not know that could be possible, two people wielding the same sword.

Theoretically it wasn't possible. A cultivator's sword was made with their own spiritual power, forged specifically to accommodate it. The sword's name was also a command that was unique to the blade and its master – the command was given through spiritual energy, and it was a specific phrase in a language nobody really understood.

Of course, there was also the fact that the higher one's cultivation level was, the bond between the blade and its master was all that stronger. That's why blades of strong cultivators tended to seal themselves once its master had died. They would respond, even as much as to unsheathe them, to their master only. By that logic, the weaker a cultivator, the weaker the bond, the easier to reclaim the blade. But a blade was like an extension of one's body, like a limb – nobody would be so vile as to use somebody else's leg to walk if they lost theirs. Nobody would claim someone else's sword. One could inherit it, familial spiritual energies similar enough to each other that the blade would accept an offspring as its master, but a complete stranger wouldn't.

Feixu's formal master had been a relatively average cultivator. Lan SiZhui was a fairly strong one. He wondered if somehow his spiritual energy overpowered the blade's original owner. The thought left a sour taste in his mouth, because it was a vile and dark act. He wouldn't want to be a person who forced his spiritual power onto a blade that did not want him as its master, but back then, he didn't know what he was doing and didn't have a choice either. All he knew he needed an object that could accommodate spiritual power and wouldn't get destroyed in the water. Out of all things he had at hand, the sword was his only option for that.

As they flew to Gusu, Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi carried by other Lan disciples, he stroked the black-red blade with his thumb, feeling out its spiritual recognition. Feixu's energy felt like it was vibrating under his finger, humming content and hostile. Lan SiZhui wasn't sure he'd be able to use it in battle at all. Then they arrived to Gusu, and headed to the Cloud Recesses and Lan SiZhui couldn't afford to let his thoughts wander.

He was with Lan ChenGuang's team in the mountains. Lan WangJi would lead the Su disciples up the mountain, to deceive the enemy into thinking they were all there was to their little rebellion. The Lan disciples were quick to guide through the forests of the mountains. It

was almost as if the mountains knew they were coming and were quiet, unthreatening. Both Wuye and Wanjian were on the northern side of Cloud Recesses, so they really just attacked from one side, but the southern mountains were vaster and could not be crossed as easily, which is why Lan Wangji chose these two.

Nearing the walls Lan SiZhui already heard the battle. Metal hit metal as disciples went at each other via swords, sharp notes of the guqin cut through the battle cries. Lan ChenGuang led them over the top of the wall and they stayed in the shadows of half-built buildings, edging towards the main buildings. There were barely any guards here. There were two in front of the Hanshi, and they saw some near the sleeping quarters, but not many. Lan Wangji's predictions were correct.

"Is Grandmaster guarded at the Hanshi?" Lan ChenGuang whispered, as if any of them knew it.

"Brother, I think it's best if we free the disciples first. Grandmaster might be hurt and if we go to him first, there will be nothing we or he can do, despite him trying and wanting to. If we free the disciples and reclaim their weapons, they can join the fight, support Second Young Master Lan while we look for Grandmaster." Lan SiZhui offered. Lan ChenGuang frowned for a minute, then surprised Lan SiZhui with a nod.

"Let's go then. Try to keep quiet. We don't want to alert those who are fighting until the disciples are safe and can keep our back protected as we look for Grandmaster." There were nods from the group, consisting of ten disciples in total, not including Lan SiZhui. They crept around the buildings, knowing their home well, another reason why it was smart that they were the ones to come from the mountains and not the Su disciples.

The rooms of the inner disciples consisted of five rows of buildings. In one row were around twenty or so rooms, ten on each side, with an occasional bigger room, like Lan SiZhui's, for more prominent disciples. He briefly wondered how it could be that both him and Lan JingYi had their future rooms even now. Two guards stood at each end of each row, which meant there were twenty guards against twelve disciples.

"We'll split up." Lan ChenGuang said, leaning against the corner of a building right before they arrived to the sleeping quarters. "Six of us stay to fight the ten guards on this side, while the other six go to the other side to defeat those guards. Once there, the disciples kept here will hear the commotion and probably come out of their rooms, encourage them to help."

"Yes." They all echoed quietly. Then they decided who would be the six who stayed and who the six who went to the other side – Lan SiZhui was one of those who stayed, so was Lan ChenGuang. They prepared, then attacked.

Feixu might've felt strange in his hand as he was just carrying it, but during the fight, it was his ruthless companion. It was much lighter than Yingjiu, its balance off from what Lan SiZhui was used to. It was also thinner than the blades of the Lan Sect. It was made for speed, not to make up for lack of movement like those of the Lan Sect. It was better suited for Lan SiZhui's sword style, he realized.

The guards were quickly and effectively taken care of. Some disciples came out of the rooms and helped them fight, even though they didn't have a sword. Soon, this fight was over and the disciples gathered in front of Lan ChenGuang to thank him.

"We will go to the armory next, get back your weapons." Lan ChenGuang said. "We need to hurry, so we can join the fight at the walls." They all agreed. The armory was less heavily guarded and it only took four of them to get rid of the guards outside, then people poured in, claiming back their swords and on Lan ChenGuang's command they headed to the walls, towards Hanguang-Jun. Lan SiZhui helped Lan ChenGuang hand out weapons, then the twelve of them stayed again. "Let's find Grandmaster." They nodded and took off.

They were halfway to the Hanshi when a group of soldiers appeared in front of them and they had no choice but engage in fight. After he noticed reinforcements were being sent, Lan SiZhui sheathed Feixu and pulled out Hudie. He bought themselves enough time that three disciples were able to get past the soldiers, continuing towards the Hanshi. From the sounds and looks of it, Lan SiZhui soon realized these were soldiers sent to the walls, and those who were already there were losing. More and more Lan and Su disciples joined their fight in the courtyard, then Lan WangJi appeared next to Lan SiZhui.

"Grandmaster?" He asked.

"Three disciples went to free him from the Hanshi, but I'm not sure they reached him."

"Stay. Lan ChenGuang! Su Huan!"

"Yes!"

"Follow me!" With that, Lan WangJi disappeared. The Wen soldiers slowly stopped coming, their reinforcements running out. Soon, the last of them had been unarmed and held at sword point. Some disciples brought some rope from the construction around them and they spent the next few minutes tying up those Wen who stayed alive. They pulled the injured ones aside from the dead ones and some disciples started bandaging their wounds – just because they were enemies, they weren't animals.

Minutes later Lan WangJi appeared again. He looked over the battlefield, to the disciples sitting around, injured or just simply exhausted, the tied up and injured Wen and those who cared for them, and at those few who went around and closed the eyes of the dead.

"How many of ours are unaccounted for?" Lan WangJi asked Su Tong.

"Seventeen dead, not sure how many injured." The Su disciple answered.

"Good. Is there anyone who still has enough strength to go to Gusu and back?"

"Yes!" Three disciples called out.

"Fetch healers. As many as they can spare."

"Yes!" The three rushed out of the courtyard.

“Let us rest for an hour. Move the injured to the infirmary. Search the Wen for hidden weapons but otherwise just keep an eye on them.”

“What about the dead?” Someone called out.

“Ask the survivors for their names and identify them. We’ll send the bodies to their families.”

“And until then?”

“Gather them somewhere out of the way and cover them.” Someone else answered.

“Yes.” Lan WangJi nodded.

“And the rest of us?” A Su disciple stepped forward.

“If the Su Clan disciples wish to stay, someone will show you to the...” He trailed off.

“We rebuilt some of the guest quarters for the Wen soldiers.” Someone said quietly.

“Approach with caution. They might still be there. Do not kill without reason.” He warned.  
“Those who wish to leave, give our sincerest gratitude to Su MuShi. We will thank him in person, once the Lan Sect had recovered.”

With that, he turned and walked back where he came from. Lan SiZhui wanted to ask how Grandmaster was, but looking around, he decided to stay and help instead. One of the brothers, Lan JunYu, he noted with a small smile, had started calling out roles people had to fulfill. Lan SiZhui stepped up to him.

“Brother. My calligraphy is quick and tidy. I could scribe the names of the dead.” He offered.  
“I’m afraid with my leg I cannot do much more.”

“That’s good enough.” Lan JunYu nodded with a smile. With that, cleanup began.

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“Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui looked up, blinking at the disciple who entered the library. He did not know him, but he stood and bowed nonetheless. “Brother, a Jin disciple is at the gates and... kindly requests your presence.” Lan SiZhui felt a blush creep up his cheeks.

It had been a week since the Lan reclaimed the Cloud Recesses, and with every day Lan SiZhui’s leg felt stronger, he was preparing to depart. He hated to leave Lan WangJi and Grandmaster behind, but he couldn’t watch Lotus Pier fall. Since he’d participated in the battle at Cloud Recesses twice, it felt incredibly selfish to not help out the other Sect as well.

“Thank you, and apologies.” He said as he stood to go and placate Jin Ling. After they identified most dead, they’d began the slow process of sending the bodies to the families and rebuilding the Cloud Recesses. Lan SiZhui had been warned by the doctors not to use his leg excessively, so he was in charge of taking care of the Library, which meant sorting through books, checking if pages were missing, noting if they were, ordering missing volumes, then cancelling orders because he found the book after all...

Jin Ling's arrival wasn't only a welcome distraction but a surprise as well. He had sent a letter with the courier who was called up the mountain to carry letters to disciple's families, informing them they were dead or alive. He addressed his to Lotus Pier, hoping it would reach Jin Ling there. In it, he informed the boy he'd be arriving shortly and not to leave.

He walked down the mountain, and soon heard Jin Ling, before he even saw the gates.

"Can you say anything else other than this?!" Jin Ling exclaimed. As he neared them, Lan SiZhui heard the guard's answer.

"I'm sorry, brother Jin, but I am not authorized to tell you."

"Yes! You said that already!" Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. Lan SiZhui quickened his pace, even though it sent a tingle of pain through his left leg. He rounded the corner and upon seeing Jin Ling, he heaved a sigh of relief. He didn't even realize how much he'd missed the other boy. Jin Ling was not looking at him, arms crossed as he glared somewhere at the mountains, jaw working to hold in insults. Lan SiZhui smiled, then walked down the steps instead of running like he wanted to.

"Jin Ling." He greeted warmly. Jin Ling's head snapped in his direction, eyes widening and lips thinning.

"Lan SiZhui!" He raised a white wrapped letter. "What is this nonsense?!"

"What?" Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows as he came even closer, passing the gates so they could talk without the guards between them.

"What what?!" Jin Ling snapped. "*'Jin Ling, I'm going to Lotus Pier soon, wait for me. Lan SiZhui.'*"

"Jin Ling?"

"Don't Jin Ling me!" Jin Ling glared. "For all I know, you could have a limb less and I wouldn't be the wiser!"

"I'm not sure..."

"You're not sure of what?! How to write words? I thought your calligraphy was perfect! It's this easy, see? *'I'm fine'*." He drew the characters with his finger on the paper. Lan SiZhui blinked at him.

"Oh."

"*Oh.*" Jin Ling mocked.

"Jin Ling, I apologize. I thought once I went to Lotus Pier, I could explain everything."

"Yes. And you thought, until then, I better stay in suspense!"

"I'm really sorry." Lan SiZhui hung his head. Jin Ling huffed.

“Whatever. Clearly you’re perfectly fine.” He punched him lightly in the shoulder and as Lan SiZhui stepped back to not fall over, he stepped wrong and hissed at the pain in his leg. “What?!” Jin Ling pulled back and stepped back, panicked. “Are you alright?” He stepped forward again.

“Ah, I’m fine. My leg is broken and I’m not supposed to put weight on—”

“Wait, your leg is broken and you came down the mountain on it, where you’ll have to go up, instead of sending someone down to fetch me?! Just how stupid are you?!”

“Jin Ling, while you were anxious to see me, I was just as anxious to see you as well.”

“Stop lying!” Jin Ling glared.

“I’m not.” Lan SiZhui smiled.

“You’re impossible.” Jin Ling shook his head and looked away. He looked down, like he would see his broken leg, even tilted his head down, but then he furrowed his brows, a frown wrinkling his nose. “Lan SiZhui, what’s that in your hand?”

Lan SiZhui looked down, not sure what Jin Ling meant at first, then he realized and pressed his lips together.

“A Wen sword.”

“I can see that.” Jin Ling nodded. “Why is it in your hand?”

“It’s a long story.” Lan SiZhui sighed. The day in the library and his leg hurting started to get to him. “Ah, I got you a jade token.” He handed it over. “It’s yours permanently, so take care of it.”

“Mine?” Jin Ling frowned at it, then tied it to his belt. “What are you giving this to me for?”

“So, you can come and go here.” Lan SiZhui said.

“I know what it is used for!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “I am asking why are you giving it to me?” Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure how to answer that. Jin Ling sighed and shook his head. “Whatever, forget it. Let’s go, pack your stuff so we can go to Lotus Pier. Though I’m not sure how much help you will be.” With that, he grabbed Lan SiZhui under the arm, taking some of his weight on his left side and started up the mountain. Lan SiZhui nodded apologetically the guards, who shared a look and behind Jin Ling’s back, rolled their eyes before assuming their positions.

“I’m almost healed. The doctors say another month and the bone should be mended.”

“Another month! And you call that almost healed?!”

“They said considering the damage it could’ve been worse.” He said, which made Jin Ling glare at him.

“Just how bad was it then?!” He snapped.

“It’s fine now.” He said instead of answering.

“You can barely walk and you call that fine! You truly are stupid! Did Lan JingYi not stop you from being this careless?!” At the mention of their friend, the smile melted off Lan SiZhui’s face. “What?!” Jin Ling demanded, stopping in their slow ascend on the stairs.

“Lan JingYi is in hiding with Sect Leader Lan.”

“What?!” Jin Ling looked at him like he grew a second head.

“That’s what I meant when I said I’d explain everything once we had a minute.”

“Well, we’re going to Yunmeng together. You’ll have plenty of time to explain then. In fact, we should depart right away. Stay here and I’ll fetch your stuff.”

“Ah, Jin Ling, it’s almost sundown.” Lan SiZhui pointed out. “We should sleep here and depart tomorrow. I didn’t even tell Hanguang-Jun I’m leaving yet.”

“Like you need his permission!” Jin Ling huffed.

“With Sect Leader Lan in hiding and Grandmaster injured, the elders gone, he’s the one in charge of the Cloud Recesses at the moment.” Lan SiZhui said. “I can’t just go missing on his watch.”

“Fine! Let’s go then.” Jin Ling grabbed him again and tugged him up the mountain. Disciples raised their eyebrows at Jin Ling while he looked around with a frown. He noticed the half-built pavilions, the bodies just outside the walls, wrapped in white cloth, the disciples walking around injured. “We should dine.” Jin Ling said instead of commenting, his voice thick. He swallowed. “Is the dining hall still there?”

“It is where it used to be, yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded. They headed that way. Inside several disciples were eating, and at their entrance looked up, surprised. No one commented, which was probably why Jin Ling just rolled his eyes and picked up two trays, piling them with food while Lan SiZhui stood and watched him in amusement. Once Jin Ling had everything, he strolled out the dining hall and headed to the sleeping quarters. Lan SiZhui followed him slowly.

Sitting in his rooms and sharing a meal with Jin Ling, despite the sounds of hammers on wood and shouts of directions where to put a log or another, reminded him of when they first arrived to the past and they were still confused about what was going on. He smiled as he watched Jin Ling pick at his food, nudging something or another to the side of the bowl before picking up some rice and leaning down to get it into his mouth.

After they were done eating, Lan SiZhui served them tea, Jin Ling the one he brought for them from the dining hall, for himself the healing tea he still had to drink every day.

“So, where is Hanguang-Jun?” Jin Ling asked, frowning at Lan SiZhui’s cup.



“With the Grandmaster as in the past week every day.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” He scoffed.

“No.” Lan SiZhui looked down. “If Hanguang-Jun was hurt, I wouldn’t want to leave his side either. In fact, that’s what I’ve been wanting to do since our legs were broken, but Hanguang-Jun wouldn’t let me near it. If I could afford to be persistent, I’d have been. The only reason I wasn’t, was that the doctors said I could lose my leg if I walked around.”

“Good.” Jin Ling glared. “You need your leg for the battle ahead of us!” Lan SiZhui sighed, sick of battles but knowing nor Jin Ling nor him would be able to sit here and listen to the news about Yunmeng, knowing they could’ve helped. He looked over at where Feixu was placed in the sword holder by the bed. Jin Ling followed his sight, got up and picked up the sword.

He studied the long, silver pommel, engraved with flame motif, the black, cord wrapped grip, the thin, silver guard, also engraved with flames. The sheath had a silver locket, the characters for Feixu engraved and highlighted with the same red the body had been painted to. Jin Ling unsheathed it, looking at the black etching in the middle and the same characters as on the sheath engraved and highlighted with red. He turned it this way and that before thrusting it back in the sheath and turning back to Lan SiZhui with a questioning expression.

“They took away our swords.” Lan SiZhui said tiredly with a small, sad smile. “At the beginning of the Indoctrination.”

“How dare they?!” Jin Ling glared at him with wide eyes. “And they didn’t even give it back?!”

“We didn’t exactly leave with... their knowledge.”

“So, you’ve been all this time without your sword?! How will you fight in Lotus Pier then?!”

“Feixu.” Lan SiZhui nodded at the sword still in Jin Ling’s hand. “And Hudie.”

“Hudie?” Jin Ling frowned, then grimaced at the sword, replacing it on the stand carelessly. Lan SiZhui nodded next to the stand, where a deep-red stained, cherry wood guqin stood on a vertical stand against the wall, white and red tassels hanging from the tuning pegs. The characters of Hudie were carved into a cloud-shaped metal plate on the head behind the bridge. Jin Ling crouched down to look at it, flicking at the tassels with his fingers. “Why does it have a name?” Jin Ling asked, looking over his shoulder.

“It’s a spiritual guqin. It’s a spiritual tool like Liebing or Chenqing.”

“It’s pretty, I suppose.” Jin Ling shrugged. There was a knock on the door and he stood, taking the liberty of going to the door and opening it. On the other side a brother was standing with some sort of bundle in his hand. Lan SiZhui hoped it wasn’t another book delivery, because he was not going back to the library. “Yes?” Jin Ling asked.

“Brother Jin, welcome.” The disciple bowed as much as he could with the bundle occupying both hands. “Since you’ve arrived so late, is it safe to assume you’ll be spending the night?”

“Don’t even think about sending me away!” Jin Ling warned.

“Not at all.” The disciple smiled and held out the bundle. “But since you’ll be sleeping here, please, take this bedroll for your comfort.”

Jin Ling was quiet, looked over his shoulder with wide, surprised eyes at Lan SiZhui, who nodded encouragingly. Jin Ling turned back and took the bundle.

“Why are you nice to me?” He asked warily.

“We just thought...” The disciple trailed off, looking over at Lan SiZhui, who just then realized he was one of the Lan disciples whom he was in the same team with as they reclaimed the Cloud Recesses. Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“Young Master Jin means he’s thankful for your thoughtfulness.” He said. The disciple went red in the face and looked down, bowed deeply then hurried off. Jin Ling didn’t move for a long moment, then pulled the door closed and turned to Lan SiZhui with a confused frown.

“What?” He asked even as he walked over and spread the bedroll out on the floor on the other side of the table.

“Ah, Jin Ling, he’s one of the disciples whom I fought besides. He’s my junior, like most of them, and... in the past week or so, they’ve been... looking out for me.” He meant they were there whenever he overused his leg and offered to take over his duties, visited him and sometimes even asked for advice while he was in the library pavilion. He didn’t think much about it until Jin Ling questioned it.

“Lan SiZhui,” he started with an amused half-smile and teasing tone, “have your juniors taken a shining to you? How does it feel to be your father’s son? It wasn’t that long ago that you and Lan JingYi looked at Hanguang-Jun with the same adoration in your eyes. Now, you know how it feels!” Jin Ling laughed when Lan SiZhui’s face went red. The sound was so unfamiliar; he didn’t think he ever heard Jin Ling laugh quite like that.

“They don’t adore me.” He looked away, embarrassed. “I’m sure they are instructed by...”

“By? By Hanguang-Jun, who couldn’t care less, because he’s too busy with the Grandmaster? Or by the doctors, who’d rather look out for you themselves?” He laughed again. “Lan SiZhui, admit it, you acquired admirers!”

“But I didn’t do anything to earn it!” He protested. “All I did was...”

“All you did was be the only one brave enough to stand against the Wen with Hanguang-Jun, come back and fight with a serious injury, I suspect also on Hanguang-Jun’s side!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“I’m not sure if that qualifies...”

“If I were your junior, I’d also be impressed by your actions!” Jin Ling said challengingly.

“Jin Ling, you *are* my junior.” Lan SiZhui reminded him.

“That doesn’t count! I’ve known you since you were a sputtering idiot!”

“You’ve known me a little over two years.”

“Exactly! Just accept the praise!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Lan SiZhui ducked his head to hide his smile.

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The boat was rocking a little harshly as they rowed upstream. Lan SiZhui didn’t like the sensation and his stomach agreed with him as well. Just hours ago, they’ve left the Cloud Recesses. Asking for permission to leave had been easier than Lan SiZhui thought. As he stood there, bowed, expressing his desire to leave for Yunmeng, not giving Lan WangJi a reason, his adoptive father hummed and simply said:

*“A month.”* Lan SiZhui had been confused and asked back. *“Your leg needs a month to fully heal.”*

*“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.”*

*“I will see you then.”* And with that, Lan WangJi turned back to Grandmaster, continuing to feed spiritual energy to him.

Jin Ling was equally as confused by how easy it went, but perhaps he accepted it easier. They set off, descending to Gusu on foot, seeing Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure if he could use Feixu to fly at all and on Jin Ling’s prompting, they hired a boat.

On the first half of their journey, it had been easier to ignore the sensations. Jin Ling had interrogated him about his time spent in Qishan, and even though Lan SiZhui left out some details, he told him about it. Jin Ling had been furious about the treatment of the Wen Sect, but thankfully settled after a short time. Then it was Jin Ling’s turn to tell what he’d been up to during the two months.

“After we parted in Qinghe, I stayed for a short while, looking for the shard. I asked Nie HuaiSang as we’ve planned, but he actually laughed at me! He said there was no way such immortal existed in the territory. Then I tried to ask Nie MingJue, but he avoided me most of the time, claiming he had business here or there, no time for me. I left just before the Wen attacked, about a week after we’ve parted. For a week or so I went around the towns and villages of Qinghe’s surrounding area, but nobody could help me out. I gave up then and decided to try my luck in Lanling, only to be roped into training when I asked Jin GuangShan about the immortal. He said: *‘Aren’t you a bit young to go on night-hunts alone? Why aren’t you in training? Luo Shen, take this child away!’* How arrogant!

“Anyhow, I spent some time training, and during that, I asked people if they heard of a spot of strong positive energy or an immortal in the area. A few of them told me about the legend

of the Damsel of Annual Blossoms, and so I investigated. Her garden was said to be flourishing and eternal and that nobody could enter it without competing, but upon arriving, the gates stood wide open, revealing a dead garden. Servants lay dead there, only a few survived. When I found them, they told me the lady was dead and the Wen had already been there. I gave up the search and decided to look for Lan JingYi instead.”

From there on, it was dead ends after dead ends. Jin Ling went to Gusu, tried to get inside the Cloud Recesses, but when he’d been kicked off the mountain the fifth time, he decided to try another approach. In Moling, nobody even heard of Lan JingYi. Then he searched the Lan Sect’s territory for a while, taking great care to be as discreet as possible in his search. When he heard the Indoctrination was over he rushed to Yunmeng.

“And from there, you know the story.” Jin Ling sighed. With that, their talk finished.

Lan SiZhui didn’t always feel seasick, but it’s been hours since they set off and he wasn’t feeling well. He tried to meditate first, but closing his eyes proved even worse than having them open. He tried to watch the scenery, but it didn’t help much. Finally, he pinned his gaze on the wooden bottom of the boat, hoping that would cease the nausea he was fighting.

“What’s wrong with you?!” Jin Ling snapped suddenly, startling Lan SiZhui out of his staring at the bottom of the boat. They’d been quiet for some time now, so the sudden sound was frightening. SiZhui was alert in seconds, his hand going to his sword hilt, looking around – nothing was moving other than the boat and the water. The rower behind him also flinched, but he settled in seconds.

“What?” Lan SiZhui asked, looking back at Jin Ling. He was glaring at him angrily.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jin Ling repeated, slightly quieter. Lan SiZhui still didn’t get it. “You’re pale and frowning.” Jin Ling informed him. “Is it your leg?”

“Ah.” That. “I’m just feeling a bit... unsettled.”

“Unsettled, why?!” Jin Ling demanded.

“I’m... not fond of boats.”

“What?”

“I get seasick.”

“Are you serious?!” Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. “And I thought you were hiding some sort of injury.” He shook his head, looking away. They were quiet for a moment, then Jin Ling turned back to him with a frown. “You were fine when we went on that night-hunt with ZeWu-Jun. And back home, when we escaped from YiLing and rowed down to Yunmeng.”

“I found short trips aren’t as upsetting for my stomach, but we’ve been on the water for hours now.” What he didn’t say was that he was starting to exhaust his Golden Core, trying not to throw up.

“You live in Gusu.” Jin Ling said.

“I live in the Cloud Recesses.” Lan SiZhui corrected. “We don’t use boats there.”

“But isn’t flying just like traveling by boat? How do you not get sick on a sword?”

“I’m not sure.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. Jin Ling made a face at him, then rolled his eyes and looked away. Lan SiZhui kept staring at the bottom of the boat. Jin Ling didn’t say anything after that.

It took another few hours, and so, they arrived to Yunmeng just before sunset. They paid the rower, then set off towards Lotus Pier. Not being inner disciples, they weren’t allowed to dock at Lotus Pier, but Yunmeng was not a big city, so they crossed it in a few minutes. Merchants kept yelling at them to buy their goods, but Jin Ling waved off the more aggressive ones and ignored the loud ones. He looked at home here, as he led them through the city.

Yunmeng was beautiful. Lan SiZhui had been here before, twice, maybe. The first time he had been on a night-hunt, and it was years ago, so he didn’t remember it much, not as interested in the city itself. The second time had been when they’ve escaped the trap in the Burial Mounds, set by Su She. Grandmaster Lan didn’t let them linger then, ordering them home the next morning, so there was very little he’d actually seen from the city before.

Yunmeng’s merchants didn’t use storage buildings at all, which immediately explained why it smelt so clean. The wooden docks were aligned so most merchants had their boats at their backs, and whenever they ran out of goods, they just jumped in the boat and got a new bunch. They also didn’t seem to store that much anyways. If someone ran out of goods, they left for the day, rowing away on their boats.

After the harbor, came the city itself. The docks’ wooden piers extended deep into what Lan SiZhui thought was dry land at first, but Jin Ling informed him was a swamp in fact. There was an obvious transition from swamp to actual dry land, as the wooden piers were replaced by smooth stone pathways, and small wooden cabins standing on wooden posts were replaced by actual buildings. Unlike in Gusu, where vendors stood in every other street, selling their goods, Yunmeng’s market area seemed to limit to the harbor, and in the city, shops and stores stood tall and proud in rows. Even food stalls were in little cabins in the street.

When Lan SiZhui asked Jin Ling, he informed the Lan disciple that quick storms were very frequent in Yunmeng, and so most vendors whose goods got damaged by rain and wind chose to open shops in buildings instead of using stalls on the street like what was typical in Gusu. It was also warmer than in Gusu, despite fall arriving and the setting sun.

While most Sects’ homes were in the mountains, Yunmeng was built upon lakes that made the entire surrounding land flat. Because of that, there was no benefit for the Jiang Sect to build their residence far out of the city, in the nest of mountains, and so they turned on a side-street, and three minutes away from the city center they arrived to Lotus Pier’s gates.

They were let inside on sight, the guards recognizing Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui’s GusuLan robes. They were then asked to wait in the courtyard in front of the reception hall. There were no white-pained walls here, like anywhere else Lan SiZhui had visited, but were stained a

bright, wooden color with gold, red and white accents. Lotus Pier was probably the most decorative of the main Sects' homes. Lotus ponds framed the courtyard, wind chimes above almost every door to the surrounding buildings. Here there were still stone pathways, but Lan SiZhui knew beyond the main hall, backwater from the main river required even more wooden piers and buildings standing on sturdy posts.

The reception hall's doors were open, like every door except the one to their right, where they could hear a lecture underway. Probably the last one for the day. The reception hall was empty, the Lotus Chair in the middle regal.

"Lan SiZhui!" That call was familiar, and Lan SiZhui smiled as he watched Wei WuXian jog across the courtyard to reach them. It was no wonder, he thought secretly, that Lan WangJi had become such good friends with him. Wei WuXian's affection, while a lot of times overbearing and embarrassing, was truly something special.

"Young Master Wei." He bowed.

"Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling, what are you doing here?" Wei WuXian crossed his arms across his chest and tilted his head to the side. Behind him, Jiang Cheng appeared and they bowed to him as well.

"Young Master Jiang, Young Master Wei. We'd like to stay in Lotus Pier for a while. We've hoped Sect Leader Jiang would take us as guest disciples for the time being." At that, Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian shared an uneasy look.

"Father isn't here." Jiang Cheng told them. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui also shared a look. "He left a week ago to Lanling. A familial Clan, the Yao Clan had been attacked by the Wen, and he went to the Jin Sect in hopes they'd aid us." Jin Ling's jaw tightened.

"A week ago?"

"Yes." Lan SiZhui watched as Jin Ling thought.

"Jin Ling?"

"A few days." He said. Although at first Lan SiZhui didn't understand, soon he realized what Jin Ling meant and his grip on Feixu had tightened. So, they only had a few days until the attack. He turned back to the Jiang disciples.

"Young Master Jiang, please allow us to stay and help as we can."

"Father wouldn't let you." Jiang Cheng frowned, looking over at Wei WuXian, who then studied Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui for a while, before he told Jiang Cheng:

"Let them stay. At least we'll have some good company until Sect Leader Jiang comes back." Jiang Cheng kept frowning, then sighed and nodded.

"So be it. It's not like you'll leave if we send you away, with how stubborn both of you are." He rolled his eyes. Lan SiZhui felt his face heat at that and looked down. Jin Ling just rolled

his eyes. “We’ll set up some guest rooms for you. Now, if you excuse us, Wei WuXian and I have some Sect business to see to.”

“Do we?” Wei WuXian frowned at him.

“Oh, so you thought just because we got interrupted I forgot you promised to help me with the paperwork?!”

“But Jiang Cheng, we have guests to take care of!”

“They can take care of themselves and they’ll have servants assigned to them anyways! Don’t be so lazy!”

“If I were lazy, I’d enjoy sitting around and grading night-hunt reports!”

“Stop avoiding your duties!”

“It’s not even my duty, you specifically asked Senior Hua to give the reports to me!”

“You’d get into trouble otherwise!”

“I wouldn’t do that while you were in charge!”

“Aren’t you in charge as well?! Grow up, Wei WuXian!”

“Jiang Cheng, stop pestering me!”

“Stop avoiding the subject and go back to the office!”

“Jiang Cheng!”

“Go!” Jiang Cheng pushed Wei WuXian towards where they came from. Wei WuXian rolled his eyes and waved at Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling.

“I’ll visit you at night, okay? Let’s have a drink!” He called back.

“Wei WuXian, stop drinking and start walking!” Jiang Cheng pushed him again. Wei WuXian didn’t move, but Jiang Cheng ignored it as he called over a servant and ordered him to show the two guests their rooms and assign two servants to see to their needs. With bows all around, Jiang Cheng joined Wei WuXian, grabbing hold of his arm and pulling him away. Before Lan SiZhui could think he was being harsh, Wei WuXian pulled his arm away, then draped it over Jiang Cheng’s shoulder, leaning on him heavily, so Jiang Cheng staggered, all the while they were speaking too lowly to be heard.

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Lan SiZhui was just preparing some healing tea for himself when there was a knock to his door. It was past what would be considered curfew in the Cloud Recesses, but not yet bedtime. Lan SiZhui suspected who his guest was and went to open the door. He smiled upon seeing Wei WuXian.

“Young Master Wei, come in.”

“So polite, Lan SiZhui!” Wei WuXian grinned at him, then joined him at the table. “It’s good to see you’re well.” He said once they settled properly. “How’s your leg?”

“It’s healing nicely.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “The doctors say another month and it will be completely healed.”

“Really?” Wei WuXian blinked in surprise. “How it looked before, I’d have thought you permanently injured it.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui looked down. “I was afraid of that as well, but the Su healers who helped us out performed a surgery and fixed it. The GusuLan doctors say if it wasn’t for them, it wouldn’t have been that way.”

“Su healers? You went to Moling at one point?” He asked curiously. Lan SiZhui nodded and told him how Lan WangJi orchestrated to take back Cloud Recesses and how they came out on top. Wei WuXian never interrupted, listening attentively. In the end, he just nodded, a proud smile playing in the corner of his lips.

“The GusuLan Sect are truly excellent people.” He said, then sighed. “And to think you and Lan Zhan fought with broken legs, while I was laying feverishly here at home...” He shook his head, disappointed in himself.

“Young Master Wei had been through a lot as well.” Lan SiZhui said. “This reminds me.” Lan SiZhui was unsure how to approach the topic, but then he thought Wei WuXian always appreciated straight talk. “Young Master Wei, after you and Second Young Master Lan had been rescued, you were holding a strange sword in your hand.”

“Was I?” Wei WuXian looked thoughtful.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “It was strange and somehow familiar. Would you mind if I took a look at it?”

“Lan SiZhui, I don’t know what sword you’re talking about.” Wei WuXian hummed. “I must’ve picked up a sword like you picked up... that.” He gestured towards Feixu in the sword holder. “Did you use it to fight?”

“Mn. Ever since I fed my spiritual power into it, Feixu had been... accommodating.”

“Feixu.” Wei WuXian studied the sword closely. “It’s been accommodating your spiritual power?” He looked over at Lan SiZhui with narrowed eyes. Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes and nodded. “How strange!”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, embarrassed. “I’m not sure if I should keep using it.”

“Why not?” Wei WuXian frowned at him. “It recognizes you as its master.”

“I forced it to obey in the cave.”



“Lan SiZhui. I know a little about spiritual weapons as I’m sure you do as well. You cannot reclaim a sword that doesn’t want to be claimed by you. There must be a reason it lets you use it.”

“I cannot think of anything other than that my spiritual energy is stronger than the original owner’s and whenever I use it, it has no choice but to obey.”

“Spiritual energy cannot overpower a spiritual sword’s owner.” Wei WuXian said. “The sword was specifically made for the original owner’s bloodline. Unless you’re somehow blood related to that person, you wouldn’t be able to reclaim it.” At that thought, Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows and looked down. “Lan SiZhui?” Wei WuXian asked after a few moments and Lan SiZhui shook his head to clear it.

“I... I actually never thought about that as a possibility.”

“Well, it should’ve been your first thought. I thought you were a leading disciple in the Cloud Recesses.” Wei WuXian smirked teasingly.

“It seems like I can be oblivious about things in my own life.” Lan SiZhui smiled, embarrassed.

“That’s alright.” Wei WuXian told him kindly. “As long as you have people in it who can point these things out.”

“In that case, I am glad Young Master Wei is in my life.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“Ah, I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Jiang Cheng says I’m oblivious all the time, but of course, he never actually tells me what I’m oblivious about. It’s pretty annoying.” He rolled his eyes. “Tell you what, you’re more fortunate to have me than him!”

“Young Master Wei, don’t say that. I find that Young Master Jiang is actually a really good friend.” Once one breaks through the anger, that is, but Lan SiZhui didn’t voice that thought.

“You’re right, of course.” Wei WuXian huffed. “That’s why it’s so annoying that he’s always so thick headed.” He shook his head. “Anyways, so, you and Lan Zhan got the Cloud Recesses back, that’s good. I’m glad to hear.” He smiled. “What other news do you have? How is Grandmaster Lan?”

“Grumpy.” Lan SiZhui let himself smile for a moment. Wei WuXian crackled up, holding his stomach and falling back to roll around the ground. Lan SiZhui watched in amusement.

“Lan SiZhui, you’re so bad!” He grinned once he calmed down and sat up properly. “One day, you must drink with me.”

“Drinking is forbidden.” Lan SiZhui reminded him.

“In the Cloud Recesses. Don’t tell me the Wall of Discipline stayed intact despite everything burning down around it!” He looked at Lan SiZhui with wide eyes.

“The Wall was unharmed.” Lan SiZhui said apologetically.

“So truly no good thing came out of the tragedy!” Wei WuXian whined dramatically.

“I’m afraid not.” Lan SiZhui’s smile faded as he looked down.

“So, what are you and Jin Ling doing here now?” Wei WuXian asked after a pause.

“Mn. We suspect the Wen might attack Lotus Pier next.” Lan SiZhui said in a grim tone.

“And you came here?” Wei WuXian looked at him skeptically.

“Jin Ling has family ties in Lotus Pier and so by association, I do as well.”

“And why isn’t your third wheel with you?”

“Young Master Wei?”

“Lan JingYi, that’s his name, right?” Lan SiZhui looked down at that. “He didn’t die, did he?!” Wei WuXian leaned closer, face turning serious and worried. Lan SiZhui shook his head. He looked around the room then got up, going to his bag. He took out some silencing talismans and activated them around the room. Wei WuXian looked at him in alarm.

“What?” He asked as Lan SiZhui resumed his seat.

“He’s missing.”

“Lan JingYi? He’s missing?”

“In hiding.” He clarified.

“Is that right? What is he hiding from?”

“I’m not supposed to reveal this to anyone...”

“You can trust me.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui smiled. “But it is crucial that Young Master Wei doesn’t tell anyone if I tell him.”

“I swear.” Wei WuXian held up three fingers to his temple.

“He’s with ZeWu-Jun.”

“Oh.” Wei WuXian seemed thoughtful. “But the Cloud Recesses had been reclaimed. Why haven’t they returned yet?” He asked with a worried expression. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“The battle in Cloud Recesses is very recent, a week old, actually. I doubt the news had reached many places, and with them hiding it can’t be easy to inquire about their own Sect. They must be laying low, trying to be as unattached as possible. They might not hear about it for another month or so.”

Before Wei WuXian could answer, there was a knock on the door. Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian shared a look, then Lan SiZhui deactivated the talismans, the paper burning in a scentless, heatless fire. Lan SiZhui opened the door to Jin Ling.

“What are you whispering about?” Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui blinked at him in confusion. “I heard you two talking then the talismans activated. What were you talking about?”

“You were eavesdropping?” Wei WuXian frowned at him lazily leaning on the table, looking back at them over his shoulder.

“Of course not! I wouldn’t do that to Lan SiZhui! The walls here are thin and I couldn’t help but hear it from the other room!”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui stepped aside. Jin Ling entered and sat at the third side of the table. “We were talking about Lan JingYi.”

“Ah. And why did you need to silence the room for that?” Jin Ling frowned.

“So, nobody could hear.” Wei WuXian said flatly.

“Duh!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “I didn’t know it was such a secret. You told me it on the mountain.” He addressed Lan SiZhui.

“Nobody was around.” Lan SiZhui said.

“What are you doing here anyways?” Jin Ling turned to Wei WuXian after a pause.

“I promised I’d come, didn’t I? And Lan SiZhui is my friend. I wanted to hear about him!” Wei WuXian informed Jin Ling in the same arrogant tone. Lan SiZhui was amused as he watched uncle and nephew bicker.

“He isn’t your friend. You barely know him!”

“Why are you so jealous?! You don’t have any other friends?! Lan SiZhui is allowed to have other friends than you, you know!”

“Of course, he is, just not you!”

“Why? What’s wrong with me?!”

Before they could continue or Lan SiZhui interrupt, there was a pounding on the door and Lan SiZhui wondered if he should just leave the door open and let anyone come in.

“Wei WuXian!” Jiang Cheng called from the other side of the closed door. “Your voice can be heard all the way on the hills! What are you doing here, you’re supposed to be sleeping! I swear if you’re drinking in there, I’ll break your leg!”

“Jiang Cheng, come in, come in!” The door opened and Jiang Cheng stepped inside, hands on his hips. “Jiang Cheng, come, sit!” Wei WuXian invited, patting the floor at his side.

“What are you doing here?” Jiang Cheng asked as he came closer but didn’t sit.

“Having a chat, can’t you see? I promised Lan SiZhui I’d come after sunset!”

“Right.” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes and sat heavily. “And I told you not to drink!”

“Do you see me drinking?!”

“That doesn’t mean anything with you.”

“So mean...” Wei WuXian pouted.

“Well, what are you waiting for?!” Jiang Cheng glared at him. “Out with it!”

Wei WuXian huffed, then reached into his sleeve and retrieved a brown and gold ceramic bottle with red tassels and placed it on the table with a soft knock. Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes and reached for the bottle with a frown, but before he could touch it, Wei WuXian snatched it up and held it up on his other side. He was just shy of knocking the bottle into Jin Ling’s head as he leaned away from Jiang Cheng. “Ah, ah, ah! Jiang Cheng, I brought this over so Lan SiZhui can sample it!”

“Liar!” Jiang Cheng crossed his arms across his chest. “Lan SiZhui doesn’t drink. And you shouldn’t either! Wasn’t it just a week ago you were bedridden?!”

“But Jiang Cheng, I’m perfectly fine! And Lan SiZhui isn’t in the Cloud Recesses anymore. Him and Jin Ling never drank before, in fact! Isn’t it unbecoming for us not to offer our guests some of the best Yunmeng wine?”

“Not everyone tastes wine the first thing they arrive somewhere new!” Jiang Cheng argued.

“That might be true, however I do.” Wei WuXian explained seriously. “And I like to share my wine with my guests, so it is actually tradition to give them wine!” He said, finishing with a smug grin. Jin Ling, under the bottle, rolled his eyes, reached up and snatched it.

“Shut up! You’re not even making any sense. Un—Jiang Cheng said you won’t be drinking tonight, so you won’t.” He looked at Wei WuXian seriously.

“Jin Ling, I’ve been drinking since I was fourteen. Do you think you can stop me now?” He sounded condescending, which was mirrored in his expression as well.

“I could stab you if I wanted to.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “And they’d even thank me!”

“Ah, that’s why you’re spreading the rumor that you stabbed me once?” Wei WuXian glared at him angrily.

“You—!” Jin Ling clenched his jaw. “Who told you that?”

“Someone.” Wei WuXian shrugged. “Then Lan Zhan confirmed!”

“What?” Jin Ling frowned at him.

“Yeah! We were in the cave and I was telling Lan Zhan that Jiang Cheng would come back for us, then I said, we must be close to Lanling, so they might bring help from there, and I said: ‘I hope they don’t bring that loud one’. Then I remembered what that Jin disciple said about the rumors that you stabbed me once. So naturally, I conversed with Lan Zhan about that. I asked: ‘who would spread rumors like that?’ to which he answered: ‘Jin Ling’.” He paused with a pointed look. “So, you see, you were the one who spread the rumor. Lan Zhan said so, and he doesn’t lie.”

“Lan Zhan this, Lan Zhan that, I’m sick of it!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, face red. “He’s not perfect, do any of you know that?” He glared at Lan SiZhui, who just smiled mildly at him.

“Don’t avoid the topic!” Wei WuXian raised his voice. “Jiang Cheng was there, he heard that Jin disciple say you stabbed me once. So, what is this all about? I’ve never met you before the lectures! And I’ve never been stabbed by a fellow cultivator either!”

“Oh, so now he’s a fellow cultivator?” Jiang Cheng inserted. “He was just a temperamental Jin disciple not long ago!”

“Jiang Cheng, that’s not the point!”

“What are you listening to rumors anyways?” Jin Ling scoffed. Lan SiZhui sighed, feeling it was time to interfere.

“Young Master Wei. This disciple is sorry if these rumors hurt your reputation. He’d never meant any harm. Please, let us forget about this.”

“That’s Lan SiZhui saying nicely to shut up, the two of you are boring.” Jiang Cheng said as he reached across the table and snatched the bottle from Jin Ling, picking up a cup, filling it with liquor and drank it at once. Jin Ling glared with wide eyes, Lan SiZhui blinked surprised, while Wei WuXian was rolling his eyes annoyed.

“Stop stealing my wine, Jiang Cheng!” He protested once Jiang Cheng drank his second cup. Wei WuXian picked up another cup, then stole back the wine and with a hungry expression, drowned the liquor.

“Hey, you said you brought it for Lan SiZhui.” Jiang Cheng protested weakly.

“I did, I did! It was you who opened the bottle without asking.” Wei WuXian pouted, then grinned at Lan SiZhui. “Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui, will you drink with us?”

“Drinking alcohol is forbidden.”

“So boring.” Wei WuXian pouted. Then he seemingly had an idea and turned to Jin Ling. “What about you? Are you so scared of your abstinent uncle that you won’t share a cup with us?”

“If you’d know him, you’d be scared too!” Jin Ling glared.

“Jin Ling, your uncle isn’t here now. What is there to be afraid of? He needn’t to know.” He pushed his newly poured cup towards Jin Ling. The young boy had a torn expression on his

face as he eyed the cup, then his gaze flickered up to Jiang Cheng.

“My uncle would know anyhow.” He said finally, turning away.

“How would he know if you don’t tell him? You’re such a prude. It’s no wonder you’re friends with GusuLan disciples.” Wei WuXian rolled his eyes with a pout, looking away.

“Don’t force others to drink!” Jiang Cheng said to him. “And must you insult the GusuLan Sect with Lan SiZhui sitting right here?”

“Jiang Cheng, stop scolding me at once!” Wei WuXian huffed, annoyed. “Aren’t we at home? Our Sect’s reputation won’t suffer if I speak freely.”

“It suffers every time you open your mouth!”

While they were busy bickering, Lan SiZhui noticed Jin Ling eying the cup, gaze switching between it and Jiang Cheng’s face. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind and picked up the cup so suddenly, it startled all three of them. With the same movement, he raised the cup in the cover of his sleeve. As soon as he lowered it, his face pinched tight and he shook his head in seemingly disgust. It seemed to amuse Wei WuXian endlessly. Once he opened his eyes, he glared at Wei WuXian, who was now openly laughing.

“This is disgusting! Why would you give this to me?!”

“Young Master Jin, Young Master Jin!” Wei WuXian wheezed out in between giggles. He grabbed one of Jin Ling’s arms to keep himself from falling back again. “I bet your tastes are much milder than this!” He laughed.

“You—!” Jin Ling picked up his discarded cup, raising it threateningly.

“Young Master Jin, your face!” He broke into a new set of giggles and Jin Ling dropped his cup, using his sleeve to swat at Wei WuXian, who squealed as he raised his hands to protect his face, still red from laughing. Jiang Cheng snorted, and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw him turn away from them with a roll of his eyes.

“Stop beating him up, nobody drinks liquor for the taste.” Jiang Cheng said calmly as he poured another cup for himself. Catching Lan SiZhui’s eyes, he raised questioning eyebrows, but Lan SiZhui shook his head with a smile.

“What do they drink it for then?” Jin Ling settled back to his place and Wei WuXian finally stopped laughing as well, pointedly putting his cup in front of Jiang Cheng, who poured him without hesitation. He also pulled a third cup in front of him and poured for Jin Ling some as well.

“For the effect.” Jiang Cheng said. “Here, this is your last cup for tonight. It should do it.”

“Why do I only get two?” Jin Ling glared, seemingly forgetting how much he hated the taste at first. “You drank three!”

“I’ve been living with Wei WuXian for all my life!” Jiang Cheng informed him. “Even sister could drink three and be fine, he’s such a drunk.”

“Jiang Cheng, don’t lie.” Wei WuXian frowned, even as he placed his cup in front of his brother again, having drank his previous one already even though Jin Ling and Jiang Cheng haven’t even touched theirs yet. “I’m not a drunk, I just have a high tolerance for alcohol! It takes me so much more to get drunk than you!” At the end, he said the last sentence with a pitiful whine, picking up his new cup and drinking it in seconds. While he was occupied, Jin Ling took advantage of him looking away, picked up his cup and drowned his liquor with his eyes squeezed shut. After he was done, he sputtered, face pinched tight.

“Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui looked at him disapprovingly, but his voice came out worried.

“How do you drink this like it’s water?!” Jin Ling shook his head, glaring at Wei WuXian with his face red.

“Huh?” Wei WuXian picked up the bottle and looked at it, then shrugged. “Yunmeng’s wines are strong. This one is my favorite. The taste is very mild and lotus seeds compliment it well.” He said as serious as if they were on a night-hunt and he explained a talisman’s use to them. Pointedly, he pulled the bowl of lotus seeds that Lan SiZhui’s room came prepared with, and picked up one, peeling quickly and popping it in his mouth. Still chewing, he said: “Try it.”

Jin Ling looked over at Jiang Cheng skeptically, to which his uncle pointedly took a handful of seeds and threw some in his mouth after peeling them faster than even Wei WuXian. Jin Ling picked up three and ate them at once, sighing.

“At least they take away the taste.” He grumbled.

“They go well with the wine.” Jiang Cheng agreed as he flicked up a seed and caught it with his mouth only.

“I wonder how Emperor’s Smile tastes with lotus seeds.” Wei WuXian mused out loud.

“Do you still want to drink that? After last time, didn’t you lose your taste for it?” Jiang Cheng frowned at him.

“It wasn’t that bad! And Lan Zhan drank with me, so it was worth it.”

“You’re unbelievable!”

“Han—Second Young Master Lan drank with you?!” Jin Ling glared.

“He did!” Wei WuXian grinned widely.

“Why are you so smug about it?!” Jiang Cheng frowned at him. “You got three hundred strikes for it!”

“What?!” Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exclaimed at the same time, though Lan SiZhui’s voice was considerably quieter.

“Didn’t you hear?” Jiang Cheng blinked at him surprised. “The rest of us got fifty, but Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi got three hundred each.”

“Savages!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “Lan SiZhui, just how harsh is your Sect?!”

“Ah, Jin Ling, three hundred strikes are rather unheard of, but consuming alcohol is one of the more serious crimes.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“You’d think you get three hundred strikes for breaking into the Forbidden Room!”

“That’s more serious, for it could actually result in death. Consuming alcohol... It clouds one’s judgement and they’re more prone to crimes.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Right?!” Wei WuXian turned to Jin Ling. “I told them it was uncalled for, but they didn’t listen! These Lan are so strict, even with their own!”

“Don’t listen to them.” Jiang Cheng told Lan SiZhui, rolling his eyes. “They get swatted on the backside once and they think that’s harsh.”

“Jiang Cheng, don’t talk like you get punished harsher than me!” Wei WuXian protested.

“I don’t, but at least I learn from it!” Jiang Cheng glared.

“Hey! When did I ever make the same mistakes twice?!”

“Do you want a list?! I might be done in ten years’ time!”

“Jiang Cheng, you’re so harsh!”

“Don’t scold him, once he’s telling the truth!” Jin Ling huffed.

“Hey! I thought you guys didn’t like each other!”

“And I don’t!” Jin Ling argued.

“Oh, so now you don’t like me?!” Jiang Cheng glared at him.

“Why would I like you?! You keep yelling at me!”

“You’re both yelling.” Wei WuXian rolled his eyes between them. “Don’t you hear each other across the table? You give Lan SiZhui a headache.”

“You—!” Jin Ling glared. “If I had my dog, it would be all over you now!”

“You keep threatening me with your dog, but I start to think you don’t even have one!” Wei WuXian snorted.

“I’ll get one for him then.” Jiang Cheng glared at Wei WuXian. “Just so you shut up!”



“Jiang Cheng, stop it! Why are you so mean?! I thought you hated Jin Ling anyways!”

“Who said that?!” Jiang Cheng raised a finger. “I like anyone who dislikes you!”

“Yeah?” Wei WuXian crossed his arms, tone arrogant. “Do you like Jin ZiXuan then, too?”

“That’s different!”

“How is it different?! You just said!”

“Wei WuXian, stop talking about things you don’t know anything about!”

It went on like that for a long time. Lan SiZhui just sat there, listening to them, occasionally chiming in, otherwise just sipping his healing tea. He watched Jin Ling, who seemed to fit in perfectly into the brother’s dynamic and he was secretly glad for him. Even if they lose and can’t save anyone, at least Jin Ling could taste how it was like to have a family. Of course, that only reminded him of the looming battle ahead of them, but at least, for a night, he could forget about it and enjoy the light atmosphere while it lasted.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Lan SiZhui's guqin: 蝴蝶 Húdié: "butterfly"

## Pride II.

Lan SiZhui woke with a start. It took him a moment to register where he was and what woke him, then he heard it again – an alarmed shout and splash of water. His eyes widened. Jin Ling had said it would be a few more days until the Wen had attacked, but could he have been wrong?! He picked up Feixu, no time to grab Hudie, running out of the room.

The guest quarters were on their own pier, behind the main buildings, separated from the rest of Lotus Pier to provide peace, but close enough to be of comfort. The row of buildings housed at least ten rooms, and their doors all faced out on a lake to provide exceptional view.

As Lan SiZhui stepped out of the room onto the pier, he needn't to look far. On the lake, about in the middle of it, was a boat with a group of kids in it, some in the water. As Lan SiZhui eyed them, one of the boys shrieked as he was pushed into the lake. He went under for a few seconds, then surfaced with a gasp, which soon turned into a laugh. The boys on the boat shouted something at him. One of the boys tried to climb back on the boat but had been pushed off again.

Lan SiZhui sheathed Feixu, sighing in relief, closing his eyes to calm his rapidly beating heart. A door opened behind him and he turned to look as Jin Ling stood in the doorway of the room next to his. He was properly dressed and Xianzi was in his hand. He cocked an eyebrow at Lan SiZhui.

“What are you banging doors for?” He asked as he wandered over, looking out at the lake. Lan SiZhui noted the sun was up and high. He must've slept longer than usual, which both baffled and worried him. Usually, even if he didn't go to sleep by the Lan schedule, he still always woke by it. To find everyone already awake while it was usually him who woke before everyone else filled him with a sense of shame. He felt incredibly lazy and guilty for sleeping in.

“Jin Ling. What time is it?”

“The gong to call for breakfast had already sounded, so I'd say around eight.” Jin Ling hummed, leaning against the barrier that separated the pier from the lake. “I was just about to fetch you to go to eat.” He glanced at Lan SiZhui from the corner of his eyes and frowned. “But I see you're not ready yet. Are you alright?”

Lan SiZhui also looked down on himself, noting with a blush he was still in his sleep clothes. “I slept late. Let me change.” He quickly retreated into his rooms and as fast as possible, washed and dressed. When he stepped out of the room, the boat was closer and Jin Ling was sitting on the barrier, shouting over to the boys:

“...Fishing here is pointless! The lotus roots are too dense. Go to the main lake, they're much airier there. Once I caught a catfish as long as my sword there!”

“You're lying!” One of the boys called back. “There aren't even catfish in these lakes.”

“You lived here all your life and don’t even know what fish are in the water?! Shame on you!”

Lan SiZhui smiled, amused that Jin Ling could even argue with kids if needed. The boys must’ve noticed him though, because their eyes widened and they bowed to their best abilities in the boat.

“Good morning, Young Master Lan!” They called out. Jin Ling looked over his shoulder at him, his brows furrowing before he turned back to the boys.

“Hey! Why didn’t I get such a polite greeting?!”

“Well...” The boys shared a look. “Young Master Lan is really elegant, and we haven’t seen many Lan disciples in Lotus Pier.”

“So I’m a common sight for you?!” Jin Ling snapped. Some boys giggled.

“Young Master Jin’s voice can be heard at night from all the way from the hills!” One of them said.

“Yeah, Young Master Jin is like brother Wei and brother Jiang!” Another declared. “It’s like Young Master Jin is also our brother Jin!”

“Yeah!” Came echoes of agreement. Lan SiZhui smiled and told Jin Ling:

“I believe that was a compliment, Jin Ling.”

“I know!” He barked out as he stood, and Lan SiZhui was worried he’d fall into the water. But Jin Ling stood on steady legs, despite his only purchase being the thin slab of wood of the barrier. “Row over here and I’ll show you who’s your brother!” He threatened. The kids laughed and rowed away. Jin Ling shook his head and stepped back onto the pier. He clicked his tongue as he stepped next to Lan SiZhui. “In my time, there was proper discipline amongst the juniors in Lotus Pier!” He said, annoyed. Lan SiZhui smiled.

“Let us go and get something to eat.” He suggested and Jin Ling nodded, frowning as he stretched.

“How long did we stay up yesterday? It’s no wonder you slept so late.” He groaned.

“I’m not sure.” Lan SiZhui said. “I think it was past midnight before Young Master Jiang took Young Master Wei away.”

“Yeah.” Jin Ling sighed as they made their way towards the main buildings. “Hey, I meant to ask you: should we go and look for Lan JingYi? You’re overly calm about him missing, but I’m not sure if you’re just being a Lan or if you truly aren’t worried.”

“Mn. Both. In the past, ZeWu-Jun was missing for three months before he returned. By that logic, we still have a few weeks until he turns up. I’m worried, but I’m reassured they’ll be fine.”

“I see.” Jin Ling hummed thoughtfully, and with that, they arrived to the dining hall and couldn’t speak freely anymore.

Despite parting the previous night with promises to see each other the next day – Wei WuXian telling Lan SiZhui, everyone else rolling their eyes – they haven’t seen neither Jiang disciple that day. They ate breakfast, then returned to their rooms, Lan SiZhui taking his time to meditate. After lunch, Jin Ling proposed they look around in Yunmeng, so they spent the afternoon in the city. They returned for dinner, then went to sleep.

The next day was spent in a similar fashion. They desperately needed to talk to Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng, warn them about the upcoming battle. Unfortunately, whenever they asked around if they could see them, they’ve been turned away, servants and disciples claiming the Young Masters were too busy to see them. It was another day until they even saw them, and it was already too late.

It was just before lunch and they headed towards the dining hall, when they saw Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian get back from somewhere, probably a class, if the practice bows they were holding were any indication. They noticed them too, and Wei WuXian waved at them.

“Lan SiZhui!” He called out. He smiled and they headed towards each other to meet on the courtyard, when a group of junior disciples ran into the courtyard. Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian turned to listen to whatever they were saying. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a look, then hurried their steps, arriving next to the two Young Masters.

“... They were all from the Wen Sect. The leader was a young woman. She was holding a kite with an arrow. She asked who owned the kite when she saw us. Sixth Young Master said it was his. The woman got angry and said: ‘How dare you!’ Then they seized Sixth Young Master.” Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling, Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng shared a worried look. It was Wei WuXian who turned back to the disciple talking.

“And then?”

“We asked for the reason. She was yelling repeatedly that he was conspiring against them and ordered her men to seize the Sixth Young Master.” Another disciple said.

“Kidnapping for no reason. The Wen Sect is getting out of control!” Jiang Cheng said angrily. The juniors murmured their agreement until Wei WuXian snapped:

“Quiet!” He shared a look with Jiang Cheng. “The Wen Sect is coming. Don’t let them get the best of us.” He paused. “Let me ask you, was the woman carrying no sword, looks flirtatious, and has a mole on her face?”

“Yes, that’s her.” The disciples agreed.

“Wang LingJiao.” Jiang Cheng said.

“Wen Chao’s lady friend?” Lan SiZhui blinked, surprised. Jiang Cheng nodded grimly and Lan SiZhui shared a look with Jin Ling. They thought Wen Chao led the attack against Lotus Pier.

“If she’s here, he can’t be far either.” Wei WuXian said with a thoughtful look on his face. He looked over Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling. “Where are your swords?”

“We left them in our rooms.” Jin Ling said.

“Go, fetch them quickly. We might need them.”

“What are you shouting about?” A shrill voice came from the reception hall. Before Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling could turn, Wei WuXian put his hands on each their arms and pushed.

“Go now, quick!” He said quietly, seriously. They nodded and hurried off.

They got their swords and Jin Ling his bow, Lan SiZhui his guqin quickly, then hurried back to the courtyard, only to find it empty and hear voices talking in the reception hall. They halted on a pier leading to the courtyard and listened.

“...This is proof.” Lady Wang said.

“What kind of proof is this? It's just a kite with a one-eyed monster on it.” Wei WuXian said.

“Do you think I'm blind? Observe it! What's the color of it? And what's the shape of the one-eyed monster?” Lady Wang.

“So?” Lan SiZhui did not know the woman speaking, but it was the same who arrived earlier to the courtyard.

“So, Madam Yu, what looks round and golden? The sun. There are so many kinds of kites. Why did he choose to draw a one-eyed monster? Why did he choose to make it gold? Why not other shapes? Why not other colors? You want to tell me it's a coincidence? Impossible. He meant it. He shot down the kite to insinuate that he wanted to shoot down the sun. His desire to shoot down the sun is the biggest disrespect to the Wen Sect of Qishan. Couldn't I say he was conspiring against us?”

Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look. The lady wasn’t just petty but quite unreasonable as well! Jin Ling whispered:

“Do you have normal family members?” Lan SiZhui didn’t point out the hypocrisy in the question.

“I’m not related to her.” He defended absent-mindedly.

“The kite does look round and golden, but it is far from the sun. What's the resemblance?” Jiang Cheng fumed.

“So, are you saying that oranges shouldn't be eaten anymore? Oranges are golden and round. But I remember that you like oranges.” Wei WuXian added immediately with a chuckle.

“So, you came this time just for a kite?” Madam Yu, as Lan SiZhui learned her identity to be, asked.

“Of course not. We came under Young Master Wen's orders to penalize a person.” Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look. “This guy, back in Dusk Creek Mountain, railed against our Young Master and hindered him when he was fighting a monster dauntlessly, which made our Young Master tired and distracted, so he almost failed. He even lost his sword.” Jin Ling glanced down at Feixu, but Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“But our Young Master is blessed to have killed that monster at last, even without a sword. I, on behalf of our Young Master, am asking Madam Yu to penalize this guy to set an example for the other people in the Jiang Sect.”

“Mother!” Jiang Cheng snapped, outraged.

“Back off!” Madam Yu ordered coldly.

“However, that is not all.” Lady Wang continued. “We have heard that not only did this Wei WuXian commit an offense against our Young Master, but recently, he had also welcomed a fugitive criminal of the Wen Sect here in Lotus Pier.” Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a confused glance.

“That is a lie!” Jiang Cheng snapped. “We don’t let criminals in!” There was a pause.

“I also heard Young Master Jiang also contributed in hiding this criminal.” Lady Wang said arrogantly.

“So, who would this accused criminal be?” Madam Yu asked condescendingly. “The Jiang Sect had closed its gates towards visitors months ago.”

“His name is Lan SiZhui.” Lady Wang said and Lan SiZhui’s heart pounded in his chest. Him? A criminal? Why? How?

“Lan SiZhui?” Wei WuXian asked skeptically. “How is a Lan a criminal of the Wen Sect?”

“You see, despite his name, the boy is not a Lan at all!” Lady Wang said smugly. “He is, by birth, a Wen.” There was another pause.

“So, what? Does that make him a criminal?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“Why he had been sentenced a fugitive criminal is not any of the Jiang Sect’s business.” She replied coldly. “However, if the Jiang Sect is hiding him and defending him, they also go against the Wen Sect. So, Madam Yu, think about this carefully. Are you going to cooperate and let us search your Lotus Pier for this criminal and ease your own crimes, or do you openly refuse and rebel against the Wen Sect?” She paused.

“You people cannot search our piers.” Madam Yu answered.

“You—” Lady Wang started threateningly, then cut herself off.

“Our own will find this boy and bring him to you. Hua Jun!” She called out loudly. There was a shuffle of feet, then a new voice spoke.

“Madam Yu.”

“Have there been any guests arriving to Lotus Pier lately?!” She demanded harshly.

“Yes, Madam Yu.” The servant, probably Hua Jun, answered.

“Find them and bring them here right away!”

“Yes, Madam Yu.” Footsteps padded away from the reception hall.

“You’ve made the right choice.” The Lady said. “Now, onto the other matter...” She started. “This Wei WuXian should be your servant in the Jiang Sect, right? Considering Sect Leader Jiang’s absence, I suppose Madam Yu can be the judge. If there is anyone shielding him in the Jiang Sect, I can assume that those old rumors... are real.”

Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a look, but then footsteps went around the piers and Jin Ling whispered:

“We should go.”

Lan SiZhui said, equally as quiet: “We came here to protect the Jiang Sect. I’ll go and offer a distraction to Lady Wang. You should collect some disciples and look for Wen Chao, try to stop him before he reaches Lotus Pier.”

“I’m not leaving you, especially in that unstable woman’s claws. We stay together.” Jin Ling glared. Lan SiZhui had a feeling he couldn’t argue his way out of this one, so he just sighed.

“Then let’s try to leave and go against Wen Chao ourselves.” Jin Ling nodded and together, they sneaked around the courtyard. There were guards at the gates, so they leapt over the walls and ran into Yunmeng. People here were oblivious to the attack, and Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look before Jin Ling cried out:

“The Wen are coming! The Wen Sect is attacking! Everyone get inside or leave!” At that, merchants and onlookers, like they’ve expected, started panicking, running around to get home or to leave. It also helped that in that moment, Wen ZhuLiu walked down the street. He was flanked by two Wen soldiers. They looked around in confusion as they saw the chaos. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling unsheathed their swords.

“Kill them!” Wen ZhuLiu ordered, then leapt into the air. Jin Ling glared after him, but there wasn’t much time to wish they could follow, because the Wen soldiers attacked then.

They each fought one soldier. Jin Ling tried to be offensive, but quickly found it was no use and he started to draw the soldier away from Lotus Pier’s gates. Lan SiZhui followed his example, though his strikes were more effective, being able to use spiritual energy. Then Lan SiZhui finally had an opening and with resentfully practiced ease, he cut the soldier’s throat, setting out immediately to find Jin Ling. He was just fending off an attack from the soldier when Lan SiZhui arrived and he finished the job for Jin Ling, then helped him up from the ground. Jin Ling scoffed at him, surely about to snarl something about how he didn’t need the help, but then a red signal flare lit up the sky above Lotus Pier.

“Where is Wen Chao?” Jin Ling asked, once the flare faded away. “Why wasn’t he with Wen ZhuLiu? Surely, the two are always seen together!”

“Lady Wang had hinted that Wen Chao wasn’t with her.” Lan SiZhui said. “She must’ve been sent ahead of him with Wen ZhuLiu to protect her.”

“But Wen Chao must be close!” Jin Ling argued.

“Wen ZhuLiu came from towards the docks.”

“Let’s check there.” Jin Ling nodded and they rushed ahead. Even though there was a boat with three Wen soldiers, there was no indication more of them would be there. Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed. “Where are they?”

“Let’s ask them.” Lan SiZhui nodded towards the three who seemed to be guarding the boat. Probably their escape route if something went horribly wrong.

“There’s three of them and I can’t use spiritual energy.” Jin Ling argued.

“We don’t need to.” Lan SiZhui reassured. “Wait for my signal.”

“What?” Jin Ling frowned at him as Lan SiZhui left him behind a cabin where they were hiding. “Lan SiZhui!” He whisper-shouted after him, as Lan SiZhui walked down the pier towards the soldiers. He called out:

“Brothers! I’ve heard you’re looking for me.” He said with a smile. The Wen soldiers picked up their swords right away, then moved to surround him. Lan SiZhui jumped into a boat so they all had to face the same way – with their backs to Jin Ling.

“Stay there!” One of the soldiers said.

“Now!” Lan SiZhui called out, and no more than a second later, evil-binding rope had slithered around the soldiers from behind, catching them off guard. They groaned and moaned in protest. Lan SiZhui smiled as he got out of the boat and joined Jin Ling on the pier.

“Don’t you dare do that again!” Jin Ling snapped. “I almost didn’t figure out what you wanted from me!”

“But you figured out.” Lan SiZhui nodded with a smile.

“How did you think to do that anyways?!”

“Despite not having all my memories, some lessons from my time with the YiLing Patriarch had remained.” Lan SiZhui said, and didn’t explain Wei WuXian originally taught him this tactic for other, entirely shameless and disgraceful reasons.

“Great. Now we’re using Wei WuXian’s tactics.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, then turned to the Wen soldiers. “You!” He barked at one of them. “Where is your Young Master?!”



“Why would I tell you?!” The soldier spat back.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll break your legs!” Jin Ling threatened arrogantly.

“I’ll see you try!” The Wen soldier snorted. Jin Ling shook his head with a snort.

“You broke my friend’s leg. You don’t think I’d do it?”

“I don’t think you’re capable!” The Wen soldier laughed. The others joined. Jin Ling stepped closer, and with some aid of spiritual energy, kicked the Wen soldier’s shin. That cried out and buckled, bringing all three of them to the ground in a heap of black and red robes. “How dare you?!” The soldier cried out. Lan SiZhui watched in horror. Did Jin Ling truly break his leg?!

“Now answer me!” Jin Ling demanded, towering over them.

“Why do you want to know anyways?!” Another soldier asked. “He’ll be here soon enough!”

“Do you want yours broken too?!” Jin Ling snapped. The soldier remained silent. “Well?! There are five more legs intact. Every time one of you refuses to answer, I’ll break one!”

“He’s in the forest!” The third cried. “Next to Lotus Pier, in the swamp!”

Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look. If that was true, then Wen Chao was already so close to Lotus Pier, he must’ve already answered the Lady’s call! Jin Ling turned back to the soldiers, then kicked them, so they fell over the edge of the pier. Lan SiZhui was alarmed for a second that they’d drown, but upon stepping closer, he saw Jin Ling actually kicked them into the boat he stood in earlier. Jin Ling leaned down and untied the rope, then kicked the boat into the current of the river.

“If you reach Gusu before someone fishes you out beforehand, let the Lan Sect know this is a gift from Lan SiZhui!” Jin Ling called after them. As their cries for rescue faded with the boat flowing downstream, Jin Ling turned away with a snort. “That felt good.” He said, then his face turned serious once more. “Let’s go.” Lan SiZhui nodded and they hurried back towards Lotus Pier.

There were already soldiers in the courtyard. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling joined the battle without thought. The Jiang disciples fought relentlessly, but without a tactic. Lan SiZhui wished they had warned them earlier and established a strategy, because with everyone throwing themselves into the fight, surely they’d lose. But him and Jin Ling let themselves be arrogant for a few days. They thought they still had some time and they didn’t demand Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian’s time. They thought, when they ran into them a few hours ago, that they’d be able to talk to them about this then, but then Lady Wang came and they were left without a chance to prepare.

Feixu, just like in the battle at Cloud Recesses, aided him beautifully. The more Lan SiZhui used it, the more attuned he became with the sword. It still wasn’t his own spiritual weapon. Yingjiu’s absence was more glaring when he used Feixu than ever, and he missed his own sword, but Feixu was good enough.

With the Wen sending more and more reinforcements, the fight seemed endless. While they had that advantage in the Cloud Recesses that the Wen were trapped in the mountain, now it was the opposite, the Jiang disciples were only fewer and fewer, no reinforcements coming, while every killed Wen soldier was replaced with two.

Simple as that, the defenders of Lotus Pier were outnumbered.

Lan SiZhui tried his best. At one point, he even pulled out Hudie and with that, at least, he could buy some Jiang disciples time to regroup. The truth was, it wasn't only numbers the Wen were overpowering them with, but spiritual power as well. Many of the Jiang disciples present were still juniors. Lan SiZhui counted, about two dozen disciples were around his age and could use their spiritual power in earnest. Their sword glares clashed with the Wen's and Feixu's joined them.

At one point, it seemed like their luck had turned. Unexpectedly, a new, powerful spiritual energy joined the Jiang disciples' side, almost as powerful as when Lan SiZhui used Hudie. He looked around the source, only to find Jin Ling, who was holding Xianzi in one hand and his bow with the other – but instead of using Xianzi to emit spiritual power, he spun and drew his bow. Upon release, the yellow glare of spiritual energy also released from the string of the bow, gliding with the arrow, and even though the arrow itself only hit one man, four others close to him also got hit by the spiritual power.

Lan SiZhui stared with such an oblivious shock, he almost didn't notice the Wen soldier swiping at him. He turned just in time to fend off the attack, and from there on, he didn't have time to admire Jin Ling. Soon, once their advantage of having two powerful spiritual tools' energy, one being Hudie, the other Jin Ling's bow, ran out. The Wen's numbers didn't cease, no matter how much they killed, how well they held.

Lan SiZhui had been pushed back from the courtyard and was defending some young juniors, when the Wen he'd been fighting against turned back and ran back to the courtyard. Lan SiZhui quickly told the juniors to get into boats as unnoticeably as they could, row away from the city. He told them they'd find refuge in Gusu, then leapt after the soldiers.

The courtyard was in even worse shape than when he left. Dead lay everywhere. Lan SiZhui stood on the roof of the reception hall and watched in horror as the Jiang disciples, who had been heroically holding on, fighting all afternoon, were now exhausted, making mistake after mistake and paying for it with their lives. The Wen who got tired just retreated and left the new blood take over. They'd never win.

There was a group in the middle of the courtyard, five or six soldiers ganging up on a female cultivator. Lan SiZhui aimed Hudie's next strike onto them. The female cultivator paused, looking up at him. Her face was bloody and sweaty, her once elegant, blue robes torn and red. She frowned at him, then looked away, cutting a soldier with a battle cry. Lan SiZhui looked for Jin Ling next, but couldn't find him – thankfully, not amongst those laying on the ground either.

Before he could decide to go and find him, the gates snapped open. About ten Jiang disciples immediately joined the fight, and Lan SiZhui's heart lurched. So they had reinforcements

after all! From the excitement upon that thought, he leapt off the roof and continued to fight with newfound energy.

But, as it turned out and became obvious way too soon, it wasn't reinforcements that arrived, just a smaller group, probably returning from a night hunt. Then, before Lan SiZhui could think about calling for a retreat, he heard Jin Ling's cry!

"Master!" Lan SiZhui turned around, searching for Jin Ling with wide eyes... only to find him in front of a man and the lady he rescued earlier! The man was holding the woman's half-slumped body, Jin Ling with their back to them, arms out in a defensive position... And something was... wedged into his abdomen!

"Jin Ling!" Lan SiZhui cried out and leapt out of some soldiers' ring, close to Jin Ling. He cut down a few soldiers between them, then the scene was finally revealed in front of him. Jin Ling had Wen ZhuLiu's sword stabbed through his side! "Jin Ling!" Lan SiZhui cried in terror and Wen ZhuLiu pulled out the sword. With three steps, Lan SiZhui was there to catch Jin Ling.

"Enough!" The call was so unexpected, even the Jiang disciples stopped fighting. Lan SiZhui looked up with wide eyes. As a hush fell onto Lotus Pier, the Wen soldiers to Wen ZhuLiu's back had parted and there came, in a comfortable, arrogant pace, Wen Chao. Lan SiZhui trembled as he held onto Jin Ling tightly.

"Don't you see that the Wen Sect is more powerful than you are?!" He called as he stopped next to Wen ZhuLiu. "Look at your Sect Leader!" He made an aggressive gesture behind Lan SiZhui. He glanced back. So, the man and woman Jin Ling protected were Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu. "Cowering at my feet." He sneered. "Drop your swords, give up the fight and we might, *might*," he emphasized, "spare your lives!"

While he was busy looking around the fighting enemies, Lan SiZhui was quick to judge his position. If he went for his next move, Wen ZhuLiu could either stab him or grab onto him. The general was known to have a special spiritual tool he hid underneath leather gloves, that could completely destroy a Golden Core. If he caught Lan SiZhui, he could lose his Core within seconds. But... wouldn't it worth it if it meant his blow hit the target?

With that in mind, he shifted Feixu in his hand and with a spin on his knees and pushing of his broken leg, he was half-crouching, half-kneeling on one knee in front of Wen Chao, Feixu extended in his right hand the furthest he could stretch it, stopping just underneath Wen Chao's chin. The Young Master, frozen in shock, raised his hands, the point of Feixu piercing the delicate skin as he swallowed. There was a pause, when he stared into Lan SiZhui's face in terror, and Lan SiZhui stood his glare with a determined one of his own.

"What are you going to do, Lan SiZhui?" He whispered. Several soldiers stood around them, with their swords half-drawn. Wen Chao's raised hands signaled them not to move. "It takes me a second to order them to kill you."

"It takes me a second to cut your artery." Lan SiZhui answered confidently.

“So, that’s how it is.” He pulled his mouth into an unpleasant frown. Lan SiZhui didn’t answer.

“Wen Chao. You went too far.” Sect Leader Jiang said at their back. “Think reasonably. What will your father do to you if he learns the crimes you committed here today?”

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” Wen Chao smirked, barely moving his head, but Lan SiZhui pushed forward, so he couldn’t escape the blade. Wen Chao hissed and made a face at him. “I’m here on my father’s orders. I’m afraid, Sect Leader Jiang, he told me to kill anyone I wanted.” He snorted trying to take a step back, as if expecting to catch Lan SiZhui off guard. He didn’t let him, following his movements with Feixu’s point firmly at Wen Chao’s chin.

“You will answer for your crimes, be it by your father or the Sects’ punishment.” Sect Leader Jiang insisted. Wen Chao huffed.

“Right now, your threats are empty and nothing to me.” He said angrily.

“What about the sword at your throat?!” Jin Ling growled out between painful hisses. Lan SiZhui’s shoulders tensed and his sword dug even deeper into Wen Chao’s skin.

“Ah, that’s right.” Wen Chao said, looking down at Lan SiZhui again. “What a subtle move.” He said, but it didn’t feel like a genuine compliment. “Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui. How long are we going to play this game?” He sighed dramatically. “You can’t win from the side you’re standing on. What’s the point?”

“Hah, trying to—” Jin Ling coughed and Lan SiZhui had to fight with every muscle in his body not to turn back to him. “Trying to reason with a Lan, that shows you know nothing about Lan SiZhui, nor of his Sect.”

“Of his Sect?” Wen Chao’s lips curled, but it wasn’t quite a smile. “I know Lan SiZhui’s Sect better than anyone here present. Don’t I?” Wen Chao raised his eyebrows at Lan SiZhui. “Isn’t that right, Wen SiZhui?!” He raised his voice enough to be heard all over the courtyard. “Silence? Is that agreement?” Behind them, Jin Ling snorted in bitter amusement.

“Lan SiZhui, when will you realize that you’re better off with your birth family than defending these weak, worthless, good-for-nothing people? You’re holding a Wen sword in your hand, doesn’t it feel right? Doesn’t it feel like you found your place? You joined the Lan Sect because they stole you when you were young. We won’t punish you for their crimes.” Wen Chao paused, curious if he’ll take the offer. Lan SiZhui didn’t even blink. “Lan SiZhui, it is time you chose.” His tone turned cold. “Join your Sect, take your rightful place in our lines and you’ll be rewarded for your loyalty. Keep defending these people, who are already dead and you’ll die with them. What will it be?!”

There was a long, silent pause. It felt like nobody dared to even breathe. Then Lan SiZhui oh so slowly rose to his feet. Wen Chao’s smile turned smug. Lan SiZhui took a step forward, still keeping Feixu extended, and with his movement, the sword swept over Wen Chao’s neck. The next moment, Wen ZhuLiu, moving so fast he barely registered it, was in front of him, and he was hit in the chest, a strong surge of spiritual energy knocking him back.

“Kill them all!” Wen Chao shrieked. “Let these four live, they’re mine to kill!” He ordered and as if time unfroze, chaos continued on the courtyard. Lan SiZhui was laying beside Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu, Jin Ling not far from him sitting up, holding his stomach as he snarled at Wen ZhuLiu, who stood over them.

Lan SiZhui’s every cell ached as he turned to his side and vomited blood, even that so painful he wondered how he didn’t pass out. Thankfully though, he felt the warm hum of his Golden Core still working and he thanked whatever immortal deity looked out for him that Wen ZhuLiu didn’t hit him with his dangerous powers.

“Lan SiZhui!” Jin Ling shuffled over, his hand holding his stomach with a painful expression. Before they could reach each other, the four of them were grabbed and dragged up the steps of the reception hall and inside, thrust in front of the Lotus Chair.

“My lady.” Lan SiZhui heard Jiang FengMian whisper and he saw the Sect Leader also didn’t get out of the fight unscratched, despite Jin Ling jumping to his defense, there were multiple cuts on his body. He was holding Madam Yu, who wasn’t in a better shape, even worse from exhaustion.

The cries of the remaining Jiang disciples losing the fight were loud in the room and Lan SiZhui closed his eyes against the sounds, only to be transferred back into the Cold Pond Cave, when Lan disciples were killed by Wen Xu to lure Lan WangJi out.

It took a long time until the last of the cries died and Wen Chao entered the hall with that vile Lady Wang by his side, going around the four of them to sit in the Lotus Chair like it belonged to him. There was a pause. Wen Chao’s neck was bleeding heavily, but he had a handkerchief pressed against it. Lan SiZhui calculated from the flow of blood that he managed to hit a major vein, but because Wen ZhuLiu pushed him away the last moment, the cut mustn’t have been as deep as to kill right away. With the amount of blood he was losing, left untreated, he’d bleed out in an hour or so.

“Lan SiZhui, you keep defying me so openly.” He drawled lazily, putting the fabric away from his wound to look at the blood. Immediately, the cut started to bleed again, so he pressed it back. “I’m afraid you truly went too far now.”

“Or he didn’t go far enough!” Jin Ling argued. He was bleeding too, next to Lan SiZhui where he pulled himself while they waited. Wen Chao snorted at that.

“And who are you?” He asked arrogantly, looking over Jin Ling. “Ah, that’s right. Jin Sect clothes, big mouth, you can only be Lan SiZhui’s cousin. What was your name again?”

“It’s none of your business!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Not like it matters. You’ll be dead in seconds.” Wen Chao tilted his head to the side.

“You—!” Jin Ling glared and Lan SiZhui honestly admired him for his bravery.

“Jin Ling.” He said softly, touching the other’s shoulder. “Don’t waste your breath on him.”

“Hear that?!” Jin Ling snapped, completely ignoring Lan SiZhui’s advice. “The kindest man I know just said not to waste my breath on you! Do you know how big of a dog you must be to provoke such words from him?!”

“If there’s a dog in this room, it must be you.” Wen Chao answered calmly. “You’re amusing me with your barking. Who knows, maybe I’ll keep you alive just to entertain me.”

“I’d rather fall into the Burial Mounds from a flying sword!”

“That can be arranged.” Wen Chao smirked and Lan SiZhui felt the urge to bury his face in his hands. Instead, he just tightened his hold on Jin Ling’s shoulder. “Now, be quiet. I have others to listen to. Sect Leader Jiang. It’s an honor to be in your...” He paused, looking around and gesturing with his hand in a dismissive manner. “Humble Lotus Pier. I hope you don’t mind me making myself at home. I’ve heard your wife had been the most accommodating with my lady.”

“Wen Chao. You can still stop this.” Jiang FengMian said, but his voice was faint.

“Why would I?” Wen Chao pretended to be surprised. “I have Lotus Pier and with it, the whole Yunmeng area under my control. It is rather comfortable, actually.” He stroked the Lotus Chair. “Although, the decoration doesn’t suit me much.”

“If you leave now, I’ll make sure the Sects don’t execute you on the spot, but consider a fair trial.”

“A trial!” He laughed out loud. “For what?! I am only carrying out my father’s orders. Besides, at the end of this, you’ll see how much better off the world is if they’re all under Wen control.” He paused. “Or perhaps you won’t be alive to see it. But I’ll make sure to send words to the heavens for you via your children. Where are they, by the way?” He looked around. “Surely, someone like Wei WuXian wouldn’t run away without a fight.”

“Wen Chao, that’s far enough!” Jiang FengMian snapped. “Leave my children out of this!”

“Oh, I can’t do that.” Wen Chao shook his head. “I’m afraid Wei WuXian has to pay for what he’s done in the cave.”

“You mean when you insulted your own Sect?!” Jin Ling snorted.

“You’re lying.” Wen Chao drawled lazily. “You weren’t there.”

“But Lan SiZhui was.” Jin Ling countered.

“Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui, what rumors are you spreading?”

“It is also true that you left them there to die after the Tortoise of Slaughter had appeared, because you were too cowardly. You cut their ropes and blocked the entrance. Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian stayed behind to give the others a chance to leave, and they killed the creature in the end!”

“Who are you trying to convince?!” Wen Chao leaned forward. Jin Ling huffed, looking away. “It doesn’t matter anyhow.” He said with a dismissive wave. “Wei WuXian had offended me enough that he needs to die. Who is going to stop me?” He raised arrogant eyebrows.

“You can’t call people’s execution like that.” Jiang FengMian told him coldly.

“Why not?” Wen Chao huffed. “As I see it, Sect Leader Jiang, right now I have successfully taken over the Lotus Pier and you’re kneeling by my feet, bleeding out with your wife and two kids who aren’t even part of your Sect. What is there I cannot do in my position?”

Nobody said anything. Then Lady Wang whined from the side: “Young Master Wen, how long will we speak to them? What is the point? This bitch humiliated me!” She pointed at Madam Yu, a hand going to her bruised cheek. “She needs to die!” She snarled.

“Don’t worry, JiaoJiao. I’ll definitely kill her for you.” He smirked.

“The Sects won’t stand for this!” Sect Leader Jiang repeated and Lan SiZhui couldn’t help but pity him. He didn’t have a good defense, here, weaponless. Lan SiZhui still had Hudie, and he’d use it if he didn’t think the soldiers backing them would kill them before they could escape, so for now, he kept it hidden in the qiankun bag.

“Wen Chao!” Jin Ling suddenly said, looking up from where he’d been thinking hard so far. Wen Chao hummed.

“What?” He drawled.

“Isn’t it your job to find the fourth shard of the Yin Iron?” Jin Ling asked and Lan SiZhui tightened his hold on him. Didn’t he tell Jin Ling he’d already told Wen Chao it was in the Burial Mounds?

“What do you know about that?” Wen Chao stood with a sneer. Jin Ling’s expression was subtly smug.

“Have you found it or not?” He asked arrogantly.

“You know where it is.” Wen Chao looked Jin Ling up and down with a calculating expression, his eyes straying to Lan SiZhui for a moment. “Unfortunately, I’ve been tricked by your little friend over there once.” He said reluctantly. “I do not believe you.”

“Well, did you get inside the Burial Mounds to see for yourself?” Jin Ling raised his eyebrows. “Or did you just send in your soldiers to die?” Wen Chao was quiet for a long moment.

“You’re trying to buy time.” He said suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at Jin Ling. “Why?” He looked around, then barked: “Look through the surrounding area! Someone is coming for them!” He ordered. Lan SiZhui looked at Jin Ling questioningly, but the other was not looking at him.

“No one is coming!” Jin Ling snapped. “I’m not buying time!” Still, some soldiers left. Whatever was Jin Ling’s endgame, it gave them an opening at least. If Lan SiZhui timed it right, they could escape.

“What are you doing then?” Wen Chao asked skeptically. “Helping me?” He leaned down, condescending tone and look on his face. In the meantime, he forgot to press the piece of fabric against his wound and it kept seeping blood. Him leaning down must’ve made him light headed, because his eyes lost their focus and he straightened with a wobble. Before anyone could get alarmed about his state, Jin Ling pushed on.

“I’m trying to save our lives. Let’s make a bargain. I tell you how you can come and go safely in and out of the Burial Mounds and you let the four of us live.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui tightened his hold on him, but Jin Ling hissed and knocked his hand off his shoulder.

“You think I’ll let you go?” Wen Chao tilted his head to the side with a grimace.

“No. I know your type better than that.” Jin Ling spat, looking him up and down in disgust. “But if you as much as touch a hair on any of us, I won’t tell you the secret.”

“Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui protested weakly.

“What do you say?!” Jin Ling raised his voice. Wen Chao watched them searchingly. Then the corner of his lips tugged upwards.

“Yes, fine.” He said carelessly. “I won’t touch any of you.” Well, if they were going to do this, at least do it right.

“No. You have to promise, if we tell you, if you have knowledge about someone wanting to hurt Jin Ling, Jiang FengMian or Madam Yu, you stop it from happening.” Lan SiZhui recited his words from when he was still a Wen prisoner during the Indoctrination.

“Lan SiZhui, you with your clever tongue again.” Wen Chao rolled his eyes. “Unfortunately, you already tricked me once. I will not believe you this time around. Twenty of my best soldiers are dead because of you.” Jin Ling quietly snorted at that. “And anyways, I have other means to get it out of young Jin Ling.” He smirked meanly.

“You think I’m scared of you?” Jin Ling huffed. “Two of my uncles are the most hated men in the modern cultivation world, both of them mass murderers. I grew up in the shadow of one and was raised by the other. If you think you, or even Wen RuoHan scares me, you’re truly as much of a fool as they say!”

Lan SiZhui didn’t dwell on the words as Wen Chao asked who these men were, because while Jin Ling was talking, he had the opportunity to open the qiankun bag, and with a swipe of his hand, he called forth his guqin, spinning on his knees and knocking the four Wen soldiers at their backs to the ground. As soon as it was done, Jin Ling grabbed hold of Jiang FengMian and stood. The Sect Leader got their plan right away, and while Lan SiZhui turned to disable the Wen around Wen Chao, they headed out of the reception hall.



Lan SiZhui followed them outside, where alarmed shouts flanked the Sect Leader's arrival. Lan SiZhui leapt into the air, sending a surge of spiritual energy against Wen ZhuLiu and his goons. In the meanwhile, Jin Ling picked up his discarded bow and sword as well as a Wen sword. He tossed it to Lan SiZhui, even as he dragged the Sect Leader and his wife down a pier. Lan SiZhui followed them, noting with relief that Jin Ling picked up Feixu.

Unfortunately, after Wen ZhuLiu's attack, that was all Lan SiZhui could manage spiritual energy-wise, so he relied on his speed as they ran away from the army flanking them. Jin Ling stopped to fight off some soldiers that headed for them from a side-pier, but Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu didn't slow, seemingly having a destination in mind. Lan SiZhui stopped next to Jin Ling and they switched places, so while Jin Ling sent arrow and spiritual energy against the soldiers a little ways behind them, Lan SiZhui fought off the remaining handful of soldiers from the side. Once they bought enough time, Jin Ling dragged him down the pier.

Lan SiZhui had no idea where they were headed, not knowing Lotus Pier's structure at all, at least until they came across some familiar buildings. He'd seen them before! They were the buildings he saw from the pier where he was talking to Wen Ning when they arrived from the Burial Mounds!

They ran as fast as they could, although it wasn't the fastest, seeing all four of them were wounded. Thankfully, the soldiers were fewer here, and their main worry were those at their backs. Jin Ling stopped from time to time to shoot an arrow their way, his spiritual energy transferring into them from the bowstring. If they weren't currently in the middle of a battle, Lan SiZhui would be incredibly impressed.

"Quickly!" They heard Jiang FengMian ahead of them, and as Lan SiZhui glanced over, he saw him and Madam Yu were already in a boat.

"Go!" He and Jin Ling cried at the same time. The soldiers from all sides were closing in.

"Come on!" Jiang FengMian called.

"Just go, damnit!" Jin Ling shouted as he kicked a Wen soldier into the water.

"I'm not leaving you behind!"

"Fuck." Jin Ling grumbled, then he positioned himself facing away from the soldiers so Lan SiZhui knew he needed to be protected and aimed his arrow at the two Sect heads. The arrow cut the rope tying the boat to the pier and lodged itself into the side of the boat, the accompanying spiritual energy giving it enough of a push that it bobbed away from the pier.

Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling didn't have time to see them go, because they got surrounded from three sides and had difficulty fighting side-by-side on the narrow pathway, getting pushed further and further onto the dock.

"Hudie?!" Jin Ling called out as they neared the archway that led to the docks.

"I'm too weak!" Lan SiZhui answered, frustrated.

“Can you fly?!”

“It’s not my sword!” Lan SiZhui shook his head, but he paid for his distraction, a sword slicing open the arm of his robes, leaving a deep scar in his upper arm. He cried out and retreated a little. He was afraid they’d get trapped at the archway, so he pulled Jin Ling after him, then they turned and ran down the docks.

“Boys! Jump!” They heard from somewhere in the darkness of the river.

“Why can’t you just fucking go?!” Jin Ling yelled over. Though he was correct, Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu should leave, they should also take their own advice and get into a boat. Surely, the Wen would have a hard time finding them on the pitch-black water! Looking around, Lan SiZhui spotted one a dock away and he took hold of Jin Ling’s robes and jumped over, landing in the boat, almost toppling it over.

“Go, go, go!” Jin Ling scrambled to his feet to keep shooting at the soldiers on the pier.

“I don’t—” Lan SiZhui looked around. He hadn’t expected to have to operate a boat! He knew next to nothing about them!

“There’s a paddle in the back, the blade goes into the water, push the shaft forward!” Jin Ling told him. Lan SiZhui found it soon enough. He dipped the wide end of it into the water and pushed the handle forward. Only it felt like he was trying to push against stone!

“It’s not moving!”

“The other forward! And where is your famous Lan arm—” He cut himself off as something stirred the boat. Lan SiZhui looked over, alarmed, to find a Wen soldier in the boat, wrestling Jin Ling. He picked up Feixu and plunged it through the soldier’s neck. Jin Ling kicked him over the side of the boat. “Paddle!” He ordered as he drew his bow again, and Lan SiZhui noted, alarmed, that there was no arrow. Jin Ling was shooting raw spiritual energy onto their enemies!

He tried again, but his exhausted muscles protested painfully as he pushed. But he kept going, even though the give he expected after the boat started moving didn’t come. He didn’t even pay attention where he was going until Jin Ling sat heavily and groaned painfully. He looked over, seeing Jin Ling hold his stomach with a painful expression.

“Jin Ling!”

“I’m fine, keep going!” Jin Ling shook his head, then looked around. The lights from lotus pier didn’t reach them, but they saw the orange glow and the men moving around like ants. “Not this way though.” Jin Ling said. “Push it towards the left a few times.” He waited until the boat was set into the direction he wanted it, then said: “It might be a bit hard to paddle until we get out, then we can go downstream to Gusu.” He paused. “No.” He groaned like he thought about something unpleasant. “We need to go to YiLing, don’t we?”

“I...” Lan SiZhui tried to think, but his mind was full of nonsense. He huffed. “I can’t think what we need to do.”

Before they could continue, a dozen or so lights appeared along the length of the shore, even around Lotus Pier. The lights ascended above the water and Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui watched, confused, as they fell into the water and disappeared. Then Lan SiZhui realized.

“Lit arrows!” Just as he said that, another wave of arrows left the shore. Jin Ling tensed and as the lights slowly descended, he kept looking around, his shuffling in his seat a stark contrast against the silent night surrounding them. “What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked quietly.

“I’m trying to see if we can spot the other boat.” Jin Ling answered. At that, Lan SiZhui also looked around. They didn’t spot it, but then they heard the rhythmic waves of water moving around as something heavy moved in the water not far from them. It was almost identical to the sounds of Lan SiZhui rowing, if a bit quieter. They both tensed, until a voice called out:

“Jin Ling? Lan SiZhui?” Jiang FengMian!

“Sect Leader Jiang!” They were careful to keep their voices down. There was a sigh, then two boats knocked against each other gently as the Sect heads’ boat arrived next to theirs.

“We better head upstream, once we’ve reached the main river. We’ve sent our kids to Meishan. Yu XuShan is the Clan Leader, she’s also Madam Yu’s mother. She would hide us there.” Lan SiZhui shared a look with Jin Ling.

“That’s further up the river.” Jin Ling told him. “YiLing is about two days or so away, while Meishan is at least five days, if not more.”

“If we stop somewhere along the way, we can rest and maybe even hire a rower. We could make good time.” Jiang FengMian inserted, though he didn’t know why Jin Ling told this to Lan SiZhui, but Lan SiZhui knew. From the timeline they’ve learned from history, it was highly unlikely that Wei WuXian had ever made it to Meishan.

“Let us go to YiLing then.” He sighed.

“Is there something in YiLing, that you keep bringing it up?” Madam Yu snapped, the first time she spoke since they’ve met her face-to-face.

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling answered at the same time, then Jin Ling carried on: “Lan SiZhui has family there.”

“I do?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused. Jin Ling huffed.

“Don’t you remember? While they were—” He cut himself off. “They’ve been known to be there in the past.” He said at last.

“Ah.” Lan SiZhui thought, and indeed, something stirred in his mind, that Wen Qing had helped the Jiang disciples before Wei WuXian had been thrown into the Burial Mounds, that’s why he helped her later... And she was responsible for the YiLing supervisory office! “Would they help us there?”

“They helped *them*.” Jin Ling shrugged. “And you’re even family. So, why not?”

“We have the Jiang Sect Leader with us.”

“And if we manage to keep him alive, don’t you think this will benefit your cousin’s family in the future?” Jin Ling asked, challenging. “Think about it. If the Sect Leader Jiang stays alive, and we take him to your cousin now, when the war is over, he’ll note their kindness and instead of the Patriarch having to stand against the whole cultivation world, the Jiang Sect can vouch for him, them, as well!”

“Boys. Speak clearly.” Jiang FengMian requested sternly, but not unkind.

“Sect Leader Jiang, I’m afraid even if we did, you wouldn’t understand the events we speak of.” Jin Ling told him offhandedly. “For now, let us worry about getting out of Yunmeng. We’re almost at the river, and we need to be—” Before Jin Ling could finish his thought, there was a sharp hiss of an arrow, then a soft knock on the boat as something small hit it. “... On our guards!”

Jin Ling stood and Lan SiZhui looked around, noticing the narrow passage they were about to cross. Even though it was only narrow compared to the other parts of the river, it still being wide enough to let an armada through, it was narrow enough to be dangerous. The arrow however, didn’t come from that way. The passage was lit up indeed, figures, like ants, moving in the firelight, but while they didn’t pay attention, they had been surrounded!

Several lights on the river followed them from Lotus Pier’s direction, which meant the Wen must’ve got on boats as well and were aimlessly shooting into the night, hoping they’ll hit them.

The boats to their back and the soldiers on the passage in front of them meant they had to be very careful. They couldn’t stop to fight the soldiers on the boats, but the moment they got into the light ring of the passage, they’d be discovered and caught or killed on sight. They had very few options.

“What should we do now?” Jin Ling asked, alarmed but still quiet. Nobody answered him for a beat, then Jiang FengMian shocked them with his next words.

“We’ll draw their attention on us. Keep fighting, so the two of you can escape while they’re busy.”

“Didn’t you just hear us?!” Jin Ling snapped. “We intend to keep you alive!”

“We will be fine. They can’t just kill two Sect heads. Even the Wen Sect isn’t that stupid to commit such a crime.” He said calmly.

“Sect Leader Jiang, we’re not talking about the Wen Sect here.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Wen Chao, even if he didn’t have a grudge against Wei WuXian, is too savage. He was ready to leave the Sect heirs die in the Xuanwu cave.”

“And Wei WuXian pissed him off enough for Wen Chao to want to torture him the most ways possible. You’re Wei WuXian’s mentors, one of the dearest people in his life.” Jin Ling carried on pointedly. “Don’t you think Wen Chao wouldn’t see that?”

“And Madam Yu seemed to have offended his lady friend.” Lan SiZhui added. “She’s even more savage than Wen Chao and has him wrapped around her finger. She would take her revenge and Wen Chao would let her, to please her.”

Jin Ling snorted amused. “Lady friend?” He asked Lan SiZhui condescendingly. “Lan SiZhui, you’re too innocent.”

“Then we will die protecting you.” Jiang FengMian ignored Jin Ling’s last comment. “You have saved our lives. We will repay that debt.”

“We didn’t save it so you can throw it away five minutes later!” Jin Ling snapped. “Lan SiZhui will think of a better plan. Won’t you?” He turned sharply to Lan SiZhui, who fell in thought.

“We could swim out underwater. If we can hold our breaths long enough, we can get through the passage without them noticing.”

“We’re all wounded.” Jiang FengMian reminded him. “And the main river’s current is much stronger than the current here. Even if we manage to get through, we’ll be carried downstream and maybe even drown, trying to fight the current.”

“Then we fight.” Jin Ling huffed. “All of us.”

“With what?!” Madam Yu snapped.

“Madam Yu is right.” Jiang FengMian said, much calmer. “You have your swords and you have a bow, but we’ve dropped ours on the courtyard.”

“You can have our swords.” Jin Ling said. “Lan SiZhui has his guqin. I have my bow.”

“How do we fight arrows with swords?!” Madam Yu scoffed. “Don’t be stupid!”

“You won’t!” Jin Ling protested. “We’ll fend the arrows off while you stand ready to kill anyone who’s stupid enough to try to get on the boats.”

“I can’t think of a better plan.” Lan SiZhui agreed.

“Didn’t you just take a blow from the Core-Melting Hand yourself?! Do you even have any spiritual energy left?!” Madam Yu huffed, her tone clearly indicating she thought he was stupid.

“I’ll manage. I’ve been in worse situations.”

“Name one!” Madam Yu demanded.

“We fought our way in and out of the Burial Mounds three times!” Jin Ling informed her smugly. At that, Madam Yu just huffed.

“So, you really have means to enter there?” Jiang FengMian asked.

“That’s not the point!” Jin Ling groaned, frustrated. “One of you get on our boat. I’ll stay with the other. If we get separated, let us meet in YiLing.” There was a pause, when nobody moved, then Jin Ling clicked his tongue and stepped off the boat, it rocking as he left. “It’s best if Madam Yu goes with Lan SiZhui.” He added, somewhat self-conscious.

“Fine!” Madam Yu huffed, annoyed, then Lan SiZhui’s boat rocked again as she got onto it.

“We’ll go first.” Lan SiZhui said, then pushed as hard as he could.

“Lan SiZhui!” Jin Ling whisper-shouted after him.

“Yes?”

“If you die, I’ll make Wei WuXian bring you back!”

“Take care of yourself as well, Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui smiled. He heard a distant huff behind him, then the passage neared dangerously.

“Give that to me!” Madam Yu suddenly shouldered him away from the paddle. “How do you plan on fighting if your hands are occupied?!”

“Ah, right.” Lan SiZhui felt blood rush into his cheeks. “Thank you for your consideration, Madam Yu.” He bowed, then summoned Hudie. When there was no answer from behind him, he closed his eyes, concentrating on the spiritual energy coursing through him.

Wen ZhuLiu’s hit overwhelmed his spiritual veins and his joints were sore from it in a familiar way. When Baxia’s sword ghost had hit him about a year ago, he felt the same way and had to rest for days afterwards to restore his energy. Although, back then the resentful energy also damaged his Golden Core, so in that sense, this was slightly better – his Golden Core was just overwhelmed, not damaged.

When he opened his eyes, it was just in time. They entered the light circle of the passage. There was an alarmed shout, followed by others, and arrows flew their way. Most of them didn’t reach them, and those that did, Lan SiZhui eliminated with small bursts of spiritual energy, saving the bigger hits for when they’d get in between the two shores.

Madam Yu rowed expertly. She manipulated the boat, so they were always an equal distance from both shores, but also always in the middle, where the two light circles met and the light was the dimmest.

“Get them!”

“Shoot them down!”

“Young Master Wen’s order, all of them needs to die!”

Flamed arrows were also shot towards them, but Lan SiZhui fended them off just as easily. Then another shout from the shore:

“Jump over, I can’t see shit!”

“Madam Yu!” Lan SiZhui held out his sword and she took it without hesitation. Surprisingly, the moment a soldier’s silhouette appeared near them, a grey sword glare knocked him back. Lan SiZhui paused to look over his shoulder. He didn’t have time to gape, so he immediately turned back to the arrows.

“What?!” Madam Yu snapped. “You thought a powerful cultivator like me can’t use your pathetic sword?!” She huffed, annoyed. “Stupid child.” And with that, she fended off another attacker. Lan SiZhui didn’t comment, and couldn’t, because the next moment something hit him in the shoulder and he bucked forward, almost falling into the water. He steadied himself and Hudie, reassured Madam Yu would take care of whatever it was. “Above us!” She shouted.

Lan SiZhui looked up, and with a spin, just avoided an arrow lodging into his eye. He sent a strong spiritual blast against the Wen who stood on their swords and shot at them from there. He didn’t count on that!

“We need to move!” He said, once he realized they stopped, because Madam Yu was not rowing anymore.

“Brace yourself!” She shouted, and Lan SiZhui just had enough time to grab onto the side of the boat, when suddenly, it... jumped! It was only thanks to his training he didn’t cry out in alarm as the boat cut through the air before it landed heavily on the water, waves crashing against the side, soaking them and seeping into the boat itself. It was an incredibly unpleasant feeling!

“Madam Yu, please don’t do that anymore!” He pleaded; his voice thinner than he even heard himself.

“Concentrate on your task!” She barked. Lan SiZhui did that indeed. They were near the exit of the passage; another minute and they’d be out. He fended off attacks from left, right and above. Once they neared the exit, Lan SiZhui called out:

“Turn downstream!”

“We’re not going to Gusu!” She snapped.

“We’re not, but if we turn that way, they’ll think we are and search for us there. They know we’re injured, they’d expect us to go downstream. Row that way for a bit, don’t reach Yunmeng docks before we turn back around!” Madam Yu clicked her tongue, but as they were still in the light circle of the passage, she turned the boat downstream.

The fight went on for a short while until they distanced themselves from the light, then Madam Yu did something that stirred the boat all the way to the other shore before it turned upstream and sluggishly started moving.

They held their breath as they passed the passage from the side this time, and searched for the other boat, but couldn’t find it. Then they left the passage behind themselves and the night swallowed them in darkness.





## Pride III.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan SiZhui didn't know when he fell asleep. All he knew that he woke with a start, head pounding, joints aching. He was lying on something cold and damp. As he sat up, mouth and throat dry, he saw forest around himself. They were partially hidden between the trees, but from where he sat, he could just see a sliver of a wide river between the trees. Birdsong was loud and chipper.

Then he remembered what had happened and he looked around frantically. Behind him, further up the shore, there was a flat, small clearing. There was a fallen tree lying just above the ground. On it sat a blue robed figure. Her posture was rigid and straight, her face impassive, not looking at Lan SiZhui but somewhere to the right instead, her jaw set.

Now that he saw her in the daylight, Lan SiZhui noted that Madam Yu was beautiful. She had a complicated bun on the top of her head, probably freshly made, because Lan SiZhui was sure during the battle she looked more disheveled. Her blue robes were still torn in places and bloody, the bottom of them a little muddy as well. That reminded Lan SiZhui of his own situation.

He was still sitting in the mud, not far from the shore, and with some difficulty, he got up. Feixu was, he noticed, stabbed into the ground just by where Lan SiZhui's head had been before. If it was a few inches to the left, it would've been in Lan SiZhui's head. That thought made a shiver run down his spine, but maybe that was rather the biting cold morning air.

Once he was standing, he pulled out Feixu, finding the scabbard a few feet away. Looking down, he noted he was completely filthy. Unless he washed his clothes in the river, he had to just accept that, even though the mud on his back pulled uncomfortably on his clothes. It was a good thing GusuLan clothing standards were at least four layers, and Lan SiZhui put on five the morning of the battle.

He got rid of his outermost layer. The one underneath was probably dirty as well, but the outer one was the worst, so getting rid of that was enough for now. Having made sure to appear in front of the lady in befitting clothes, he went over to where she was sitting, noting the small firepit in front of her, which didn't hold a fire anymore, just softly glowing ambers.

"Good morning, Madam Yu." He greeted politely with a bow. She turned to him, eyes sharp and eyebrows drawn in an angry line.

"While you were passed out, I rowed ourselves up the river, pulled you to shore, got rid of the boat, started a fire and kept watch. But I'm really glad you could rest." She said sarcastically and Lan SiZhui flinched.

"If you like, I can keep watch while you rest, Madam Yu."

“You almost completely drained your Golden Core. You think I’m going to trust that you won’t fall asleep on me?! Look at you! You can barely stand!” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. While Madam Yu was right, he found it odd she was so harsh about it. It was like Jin Ling when they just got to know each other, except her tone held real threat, unlike fifteen year old Jin Ling, who could only threaten others with his uncle’s presence. Lan SiZhui wondered how far this temper went in Jin Ling’s ancestors. Jiang Cheng, Madam Yu...

“Thank you for caring for me all night, Madam Yu.” He bowed deeply. “I didn’t realize I was so careless.” She didn’t answer, just huffed and looked away. Lan SiZhui was unsure what he was supposed to do now. “Do you know where we are?” He asked, looking around. He didn’t know the Jiang Sect’s territory all that well.

“We’re not nearly far enough away from Yunmeng.” She said, annoyed. “If I was alone, I’d be farther away.”

Lan SiZhui bit his lip and contemplated their situation.

“Madam Yu, me and Jin Ling discussed this last night. If we got separated, I’m sure he’d go to YiLing to wait for us. Should we go and meet them there?” While he tried to be polite about it, it wasn’t really a question. Madam Yu knew as well as Lan SiZhui that Jiang FengMian was unlikely to abandon Jin Ling or convince him to go to Meishan, so they’d most likely also end up in YiLing.

“And how do you intend to go there?” She asked with her eyebrows raised. “I got rid of the boat so they wouldn’t find us on the water.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“That was probably a smart decision. How about we hire a cart and go to YiLing that way?” Madam Yu rolled her eyes, but she stood with a flick of her sleeve. Lan SiZhui followed her further away from the shore when something occurred to him. He hesitated. “Madam Yu, should we disguise ourselves? We’re too noticeable in this state.” He referred to his own, white clothes that were bloodied by his own and the Wen soldiers’ blood. Madam Yu was also obvious with her Yunmeng robes and cuts all over her body.

“What disguise were you thinking of? Should we roll around the mud? Or do you have spare clothes somewhere on your person too?” She glared back at him. “Are you that resourceful?”

“I was thinking I could go ahead and buy us some ordinary clothes.” Lan SiZhui said.

“And I’m just supposed to trust that you won’t just run to a Wen soldier and report us?!”

“Why would I do that, Madam Yu?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows, confused. She huffed.

“You’re a Wen, aren’t you? Or are you saying your loyalty is that fickle?”

“Madam Yu, I am an orphan. When I was still a toddler, a kind man helped raising me. When he died, the GusuLan Sect took me in and raised me as their own. I have very few memories of being a Wen and even less reason to be loyal to them. My cousins, the ones who live in YiLing are not of the main family, but a smaller branch of healers. They never participated in

the—I mean, they do not shed blood. They are actually against violence, and the QishanWen Sect's actions do not reflect their stand in this matter. So, please, don't say that."

"Wen SiZhui, your words are clever but they hold very little weight for me." Madam Yu told him coldly. "I do not and can not trust you."

Lan SiZhui looked down, face not quite in a frown. He didn't know how else he could convince Madam Yu. He risked his life getting her and her husband out of Lotus Pier, and while he didn't expect payment or gratitude, he still felt wronged that Madam Yu handled him so coldly. Still, being part of the Lan Sect, he did not anger, simply bowed to her.

"I understand, Madam Yu. However, I request you not to call me that. I am Lan SiZhui of the Lan Sect of Gusu."

Madam Yu didn't say anything for a long while, then she huffed, turned and began walking again. Lan SiZhui hurried to catch up. They walked for an hour or so in frosty silence that competed with Lan Wangji's when they were still in Qishan and he learned about Lan SiZhui's dishonesty. They were still both exhausted. Lan SiZhui's joints ached, and he felt faint from the lack of spiritual energy going through him, but he refused to slow or break unless Madam Yu did. Which she did not. Eventually, they reached a road.

They still did not talk, but Lan SiZhui figured it would be best if he tried to disguise himself at least a little bit, so with great distaste, he untied his forehead ribbon. That was the most obvious part of his outfit. If the Wen soldiers saw a young man in white robes walking around, they might not have thought much of it, but if they saw a Lan disciple alone, they'd definitely think it was Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui wondered when did that even occur to him, but he just assumed Jin Ling wasn't the only one to learn from the Lan disciples he spent time with.

The village they arrived to was relatively quiet. Despite his expectations, they didn't actually run into any Wen soldiers, so they could freely shop for new clothes. Madam Yu handled Lan SiZhui like he was air the whole time, not looking at him even once.

They hired a cart to take them to YiLing. The driver told them it would take about two days, but Madam Yu paid him extra to hurry. As they rode, Lan SiZhui meditated, while Madam Yu was still awake and alert. Lan SiZhui didn't feel like he could tell her to relax, but he also knew she must be exhausted. Not knowing what to do, he ended up saying nothing, but felt guilty about it.

The carriage ride was slower than Lan SiZhui would've liked, but the driver hurried the horses as much as he could, so he couldn't complain. They paid enough money to the driver to keep moving at night as well. It was a relentless ride and Lan SiZhui never felt more uncomfortable around someone before, but they had no choice. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling already agreed to meet in YiLing and they knew where they would be going. Madam Yu did not know how to find her husband if not this way. She could've gone to Meishan to regroup and gather resources, return to Yunmeng area and turn it upside down looking for her husband, but she did not propose that idea. Lan SiZhui didn't mention it either.

By midmorning the next day, Lan SiZhui started noticing familiar surroundings.

“We’re about an hour away.” The driver called out.

“So, who is this cousin of yours?” Madam Yu asked then. “Is it someone close to Wen RuoHan?” She asked sarcastically. Lan SiZhui shook his head, hesitated, then shrugged.

“I must admit I don’t know her very well. I’ve always ever been closer to my other cousin, her little brother. We never really spoke of their relationship with the QishanWen Sect. We’ve talked about it briefly during the Indoctrination, and then she told me she doesn’t care about politics, that she’s a doctor and her kind doesn’t take sides.”

“So, you don’t even know her, but you’d take me to her?” She glared at him. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“We’re not going just yet. We’re meeting Jin Ling in the local inn. We will probably check in with my cousin, see if our friends are here.”

At that, Madam Yu didn’t answer. She looked strange in the new clothes they got her. They were significantly cheaper than the ones she had on before, but she wore them with grace, just like Lan SiZhui. They were undyed, rough, scratchy clothes of commoners that the cultivators were not used to. Seeing such an elegant woman as Madam Yu in them felt wrong.

They arrived by late morning. The horses were huffing in the cold autumn air, steam coming out their noses, while also leaving their body. They almost looked like they were smoking, while foam also dripped from their chin; an example of just how fast the driver forced them to run. Lan SiZhui rubbed one’s nose in parting, hoping they would be alright after such a rush.

“Wen SiZhui, stop playing with the horses and take me to my husband already.” Madam Yu snapped from the side. Lan SiZhui sighed. He expected this, after he requested Madam Yu not to call him by that name, that Madam Yu would not listen, so he wasn’t upset. He just hoped his actions spoke louder than Wen Chao’s declaration of his birthname.

He led Madam Yu towards the inn wordlessly. Looking around, he didn’t see Wen soldiers, so he was reassured they were not there yet, but they couldn’t have much time left. From history, he learned that Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian took shelter in YiLing shortly after Yunmeng’s fall. Unfortunately, the soldiers and Wen Chao reached them and they threw Wei WuXian into the Burial Mounds.

Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure about a lot of what happened during this time. Why did the two boys take shelter in YiLing and not go to Meishan, like their parents requested? How long did all this take? How did Wen Chao find Wei WuXian and punished him but not Jiang Cheng?

There was a lot that was either lost in the details due to too much happening at once, or forgotten, or never told to be recorded.

Lan SiZhui entered the inn he knew so well by now thanks to his and his friends’ stay months earlier. He walked up to the counter to request a room, however, before he reached it, a young man in plain robes stepped up before him, cutting him off rudely.

“Waiter, get some lunch up to my senior’s room. He won’t be able to open the door for you, so just enter when he calls out.” He said in a familiar voice and slammed a silver onto the counter. “Also prepare some lunch for me, too. Have you seen my guests yet?”

“No, sir. I’ll continue to keep an eye out.” The waiter told him.

“A woman and an elegant young man. Don’t forget it. They’ll be an odd pair.” Jin Ling told the waiter in a harsh tone.

“Will you be eating in your room, sir?”

“No, I’ll be here. Keep an eye out while you take the lunch up to my senior.”

“May I ask what room your senior is staying at?” Lan SiZhui asked from behind, an amused smile gracing his lips. Jin Ling spun around, expression stormy as he looked for the source of the noisy person.

“How’s that any of your—” He cut himself off as he noticed Lan SiZhui and Madam Yu standing behind him. His eyes widened and he took a step forward, as if wanting to hug Lan SiZhui, only to change his mind at the last moment. His momentum failed and he awkwardly looked away. He then bowed. “Madam.”

“So, where is he?” Madam Yu snapped, impatient. Jin Ling looked up at her with a frown. He looked over at Lan SiZhui, who tried to communicate with his eyes to tell her. Jin Ling sighed and turned around.

“Waiter!” He barked and the man who was busy piling food on a tray, looked up. “My guests are here. Take the Madam to my senior’s room.”

“Uh, sir, isn’t that inappropriate—” The waiter started, but Jin Ling stepped forward, threateningly.

“Don’t I pay you enough to don’t ask questions?!”

“Of course.” The waiter stuttered out and bowed. He gestured to Madam Yu to follow him, which she did with a flick of her robes. Jin Ling glared after her before turning back to Lan SiZhui.

“Was she like that the whole way here?” Lan SiZhui nodded tiredly. “Your journey must’ve been the most boring.”

“Awkward.” Lan SiZhui nodded his agreement. Jin Ling snorted, then gestured to Lan SiZhui to follow him, leading him up to the rooms. The waiter just closed a door to one of them when they got to the top of the stairs. Seeing them, the waiter stopped and bowed to them.

“The lunch I ordered, take it to my room. And bring enough for two. Make sure one of the dishes doesn’t have meat in it.” Jin Ling ordered.

“Of course, sir.” The waiter bowed. Lan SiZhui stepped forward and bowed as well.

“Thank you for the service and sorry for the trouble, sir.” He said smoothly and the waiter seemed somewhat relieved at the polite words and faintly smiled before hurrying back down the stairs. Jin Ling huffed, rolled his eyes and led Lan SiZhui to a familiar room. It took Lan SiZhui until they sat to realize it was the same room him and Lan JingYi had stayed previously.

Lan SiZhui was extremely tired at that point. He had meditated on the way over, but his spiritual energy still hasn’t returned. As was expected from such an injury, it was slow to heal. Jin Ling must’ve noted it, because he got up and went to the cupboard where rooms were usually prepared with tea. He picked up a strong blend that would help Lan SiZhui keep awake for a short while and prepared it for them.

Neither spoke while Jin Ling made and poured the tea, then after a few sips, he finally let out a sigh and slumped from his tense position. Lan SiZhui watched, concerned, as Jin Ling cradled his stomach.

Ah, that’s right! Lan SiZhui suddenly remembered that Wen ZhuLiu didn’t only hit Lan SiZhui, but also stabbed Jin Ling. He was ready to go over to check the wound, but Jin Ling must’ve sensed his intention and held up his hand.

“It’s fine.”

Lan SiZhui shook his head. “You’re seriously injured. I could at least clean it and wrap it, even if I can’t heal it properly.”

Jin Ling waved a hand. “I already cleaned it and wrapped it. It’s fine as long as I don’t move around much.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui warned. “It is not doing any of us good if you hide the severity of your injury.”

“I’m not hiding it.” Jin Ling shook his head. “I even bought a tincture of pain relief. It’s really fine for now.”

“Jin Ling, earlier, you seemed mad about something.” Lan SiZhui mentioned after a pause. Not wanting to push his friend, knowing what results he’d get, he dropped the topic of the injury for now.

“Sect Leader Jiang is frustrating sometimes.” Jin Ling mumbled, looking away.

“How so?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. While Madam Yu had a good reason to hate Lan SiZhui, he doubted Jiang FengMian would be angry at Jin Ling. To hear they didn’t get along was strange.

“He just is!” Jin Ling claimed, glaring at him. Lan SiZhui sighed. “Anyhow, we should plan our next move.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded in agreement.

“Sect Leader Jiang is injured.” Jin Ling told him unexpectedly. Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened. “He got shot with an arrow in the thigh. I’ve tried to take care of it the best I could, but I’m afraid my medical knowledge is poor, compared to yours.” He frowned, getting lost in thought for a moment. He then shook his head and looked Lan SiZhui in the eye seriously. “Lan SiZhui, now that we’re here, there’s something we must talk about.”

“What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked, wondering about Jin Ling’s serious tone. The boy was rarely like this. Jin Ling seemed hesitant.

“There are things in the past...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “We don’t know much about this time.” Lan SiZhui nodded in understanding.

“We shouldn’t rely too much on our knowledge of the past from now on.” He voiced his agreement. “Remember, we rescued Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu. Whatever happened after this point might never even happen.”

Jin Ling looked at him for a long, long time, as if contemplating something. He then looked down, brows furrowing. In the end, he looked up with a strange expression. It wasn’t hopeful per se, but somehow hoping. He nodded.

“Uh, we must take Sect Leader Jiang to Wen Qing.” Jin Ling said in the end.

“It won’t be easy to convince Madam Yu.”

“We don’t have a choice.” Jin Ling said. “Despite his condition now, Sect Leader Jiang is seriously injured.” He sighed. “Even though the old bastard is reluctant, I’m not willing to let him die.” Before they could talk further, there was a knock on the door.

Their lunch was brought and Lan SiZhui thanked the waiter politely before bringing the food to the table. Him and Jin Ling ate in silence for a while.

“Even if history goes differently, we should still plan for the things we know might happen.” Jin Ling said in a tired voice after they finished eating. Lan SiZhui hummed.

“With Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu alive, everything changes.”

“Right.” Jin Ling nodded. “As we said before, this would aid us in the future, prevent Wei WuXian’s turn into madness—”

“That’s further away than what I mean. I mean if they meet here, in YiLing, then will Wei WuXian even turn to demonic cultivation? Think about it.” Jin Ling frowned at him once again, then made a gesture as if urging him to continue. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and nodded. “Senior Wei turned to demonic cultivation because he had no choice after he was thrown into the Burial Mounds. If they learn now that their parents are alive, maybe they go to Meishan and Wei WuXian is never thrown in.”

“You’re worried that if he doesn’t turn to demonic cultivation, we will not win the war.” Jin Ling concluded. It wasn’t like they haven’t talked about this before, so Lan SiZhui nodded. “You’re either giving Wei WuXian too much credit or you don’t find the main Sects strong

enough.” Jin Ling scoffed. “Wei WuXian killed my father and mother with his demonic cultivation. If we can prevent him ever using it, then shouldn’t we?”

“I agree.” Lan SiZhui said. “I also don’t want Wei WuXian to fall into the Burial Mounds. I’m just wondering... If he doesn’t, what are we going to do?”

“We do our best to help the Sects win the war.” Jin Ling nodded. “Wei WuXian suffering can’t be the only solution.”

“Of course not!” Lan SiZhui stressed. He didn’t like the notion any more than Jin Ling did, but he did not see any other way to defeat Wen RuoHan’s undead army. “Jin Ling, can you say any method how to get rid of Wen RuoHan’s puppets?”

“You have your musical cultivation, have you not?” Jin Ling looked at him pointedly.

“Which would help if it was only one or two corpses.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but seemed to think about it more. Slowly, a frown formed on his face.

“Lan SiZhui, we still haven’t found that one shard Wei WuXian would be using in the Burial Mounds.” Lan SiZhui blinked, realizing Jin Ling was right and nodded. “Alright. This is going to sound crazy, but what if we offer it to Wen RuoHan in order to gain access inside his palace and kill him then?”

“There’s too much risk of him taking the shard with force and we still don’t have it anyways.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, but this also inspired an idea in him. “But we needn’t to gain access inside, for we have one already.”

“And what’s that?” Jin Ling asked skeptically.

“Your uncle. Jin GuangYao was a spy in Nightless City.” Jin Ling looked at him with wide eyes and a frown.

“You want to conspire with my uncle?!” He asked, outraged.

“Wasn’t he the one to stab Wen RuoHan in the end?” Admittedly, after Wei WuXian took his attention away from the battlefield and their surroundings, which allowed Jin GuangYao to get close enough. But if they could somehow occupy him... Maybe there really was no need for Wei WuXian to use demonic cultivation?

“That doesn’t mean we should help him!” Jin Ling told him.

“Think about it. It is the only way we might be able to win the war without a bloodshed.” Lan SiZhui tried to reason.

“We have many choices.” Jin Ling told him with a strict look. “This cannot be the only solution. I refuse to believe that.”

“Jin Ling—” Before Lan SiZhui could finish, there was another knock on the door. They fell in a minute of silence, then Jin Ling answered it.



“Sir, you asked me to let you know if Wen soldiers arrive.”

“Wen soldiers are in YiLing?”

“Yes, sir.” Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look. They thanked the man and as soon as he was gone, Lan SiZhui also stood.

“We have to go.” Jin Ling said, avoiding eye contact as he picked up his discarded weapons. Lan SiZhui followed him out of the room, down the hall and in front of another room, where he knocked. There was a long pause without an answer, so Jin Ling knocked again. “They didn’t leave, did they?” He frowned, looking back at Lan SiZhui, who shrugged. “Sect Leader, this is Jin Ling. The Wen had caught up with us, we need to go.” He said through the door. There was another pause, then the door snapped open and Madam Yu glared at them. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui bowed to her.

“May we enter?” Lan SiZhui asked. Madam Yu didn’t say a word, just huffed, turned and went back to the bed where Jiang FengMian was sitting. He had his left leg extended in front of him, a golden strip of fabric tightly tied around his thigh, saturated with blood.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui. It’s good to see you’re alright.” Jiang FengMian breathed, relieved. Lan SiZhui bowed in greetings.

“It is good to see Sect Leader Jiang as well. Please let me take a look at your wound.” Lan SiZhui asked politely.

“No way!” Madam Yu snapped as she stood between Lan SiZhui and Jiang FengMian. “Is it not enough that you brought danger on our heads, you expect us to trust you still?!” She glared.

“My lady, that’s enough.” Jiang FengMian said, weakly but sternly from behind her. “Lan SiZhui is A-Xian and A-Cheng’s friend.”

“As if that changes anything!” She didn’t move.

“Madam Yu, your husband is in poor shape. An arrow hit him.” Jin Ling sneered from behind Lan SiZhui’s shoulder. “If he doesn’t get treated, he might die!”

“Then he will die with honor, not being tended by a Wen!”

“What do you mean by that?!” Jin Ling stepped forward, bumping into Lan SiZhui. “Lan SiZhui is a Lan, not a Wen!”

“He could call himself a Jiang and I still wouldn’t trust him.”

“Madam Yu, I understand your alarm, but Sect Leader Jiang is hurt. Please, let me tend to his wound. Once it is done, I am willing to discuss my heritage.” Lan SiZhui said earnestly.

“My lady, let the boy here.” Jiang FengMian said sternly again. For a long moment nobody moved.

“This is ridiculous.” Jin Ling huffed. “Do you want your husband to die?”

“Didn’t he survive so far?” She glared at Jin Ling. “We will go to Meishan and he will be fine.”

“Even if you don’t let me treat his wound, at least let us take him to my cousin.” Lan SiZhui offered.

“Do you think I’m that stupid to deny a Wen just to take my husband to another? We’ll go to Meishan, where my Clan’s healers can help him. I came with you here because I knew my husband would be here, but our journey together ends here.” She told him sternly. “You said you barely know your cousin. I don’t trust you and I trust her even less.”

“You say you’re not stupid but your intentions are speaking of carelessness, Madam Yu.” Jin Ling told her with an attitude.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui warned him, not wanting the boy to further anger the Sect head.

“I saved Sect Leader Jiang’s life. I’m not giving up just because his wife is an idiot!” He told Lan SiZhui.

“Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui looked at Jin Ling in horror.

“How dare you!” Madam Yu glared at him.

“You’re so quick to call out our stupidity, yet you can’t see your own. Madam Yu, I’ve heard stories about your intelligence and strength. I grew up learning how frighteningly sharp you were. So, why don’t you use your wit now? Lan SiZhui can help Sect Leader Jiang and his cousin lives close by. As soon as we get to her, she can heal Sect Leader Jiang enough to transfer him to Meishan. You needn’t to even part from him.” Jin Ling stared the Madam down and Lan SiZhui waited with his breath held back for her decision.

There was silence for a long minute, then she said threateningly: “If he as much as cries out in pain you’re dead, Wen SiZhui.”

“His name is Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling snapped. Lan SiZhui didn’t pay that any mind, just bowed, then hurried over to Jiang FengMian, who was breathing heavily, one hand on his leg above the bandage. He examined the wound. The arrow had been taken out, but the wound was still bleeding excessively.

“Jin Ling, when did he get hurt?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“Back at the channel.” Jin Ling said from above them. “When we separated.”

“Mn.”

“What?” Jin Ling crouched next to him.

“It’s still bleeding. That means the arrow hit a major vein.” He grimaced. “We need to take him to a healer quickly. It’s a wonder he’s still alive.” He looked around, but before he could

tear something up to use as bandages, Jin Ling appeared by his side with some bandages. Lan SiZhui nodded him his thanks. "Sect Leader Jiang, this might hurt."

"Just do it." Jiang FengMian nodded looking at him. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and nodded, then tied off the bandage as tight as he could. Jiang FengMian groaned painfully, throwing back his head. Lan SiZhui quickly finalized the knot and bandaged the wound, so it wouldn't be exposed.

"Alright. This will do for a short while, but I don't know how much blood he already lost. We need to go quickly."

"He's good enough to go to Meishan now." Madam Yu protested. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"As I said, it is a wonder he's still alive. He lost a lot of blood. The sooner he sees a healer, the better. We're going to the YiLing supervisory office." He turned to his friend. "Jin Ling, how do you think we should approach the situation?"

"Why are you asking me?!" Jin Ling glared at him. "You're the smart one!"

"We shouldn't all go there." Jiang FengMian said. "We might get recognized, even in these clothes. Lan SiZhui, how well do you know this cousin of yours? Are you sure they're trustworthy?"

"Yes." Lan SiZhui nodded. "In the past, she helped me and Wei WuXian even though she didn't need to. Back at Xuanwu cave, she ordered the Wen to stand down when Wei WuXian was threatened and she also held me back from injuring myself further."

"How do you know she'll help you now?" Madam Yu glared at him.

"I'm confident she cares deeply about people in need of help. She might not be... pleased with our presence, but I'm sure she won't turn us away if she learns we need her."

"I suspect we can't just say we're in need of help, because then the guards would send us away." Jin Ling said with a frown. Lan SiZhui nodded.

"Why do we need her anyways? We can just find a healer in YiLing." Madam Yu said.

"Madam Yu, a regular healer might not be able to help such a strong cultivator. Besides, me and Lan SiZhui need to visit her anyways. It only makes sense if we take Sect Leader Jiang there as well. And besides, where could we hide from the Wen best, if not among them?"

"Why do you want to visit her?" Madam Yu looked at them sharply.

"We suspect some friends of ours are there as well. We need to see for ourselves." Jin Ling said. "Perhaps you could go ahead, Lan SiZhui, convince her to help us and then she could sneak us in at night." He suggested, but Lan SiZhui shook his head with a thoughtful expression.

"Sect Leader Jiang needs the medical attention as soon as possible."

“So, take him with you.” Jin Ling said.

“The guard would be suspicious of us. I could convince them that I’m Wen Qing’s cousin, but if I have an adult with me, I’m not sure they wouldn’t kill us on sight.”

“Ah, I have an idea!” Jin Ling exclaimed after a long pause.

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Jin Ling’s plan had many faults, but lacking a better one, they had only that. The walk from YiLing to the supervisory office a little way outside town was tiring to all of them, but as soon as the gates came into view, they did their best to appear collected.

Lan SiZhui only wished he wasn’t the one chosen to speak, but Jiang FengMian reasoned, smartly, that his manners would get them inside much sooner. The guards tensed as soon as they saw them approach and Jin Ling’s hand flexed on his sword.

Lan SiZhui had a moment of doubt. Jin Ling was carrying Xianzi and Lan SiZhui had his bow slung over his shoulder. They were both Jin standard weapons, and he cursed himself for not thinking of that first. They discussed back at the inn that they should all have weapons on them, so their story would make sense for the guards. When Jin Ling gave him his bow and Lan SiZhui handed Feixu to Jiang FengMian, it didn’t even occur to him that the only Wen weapon they had was Feixu. They only gave it to Sect Leader Jiang because he was the strongest cultivator among them, even in his injured state. If it came to fighting, he could wield the spiritual sword the best of them all.

“Who goes there?!” One of the guards called out. “This is the Wen Sect’s supervisory office. No visitors allowed!”

“Sir.” Lan SiZhui bowed once they were in hearing range. “I am Wen Yuan from the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect. These are my senior teachers and my disciple mate. We were on a night-hunt nearby when someone attacked us. My disciple mate and my seniors are severely injured. We were hoping my cousin, the lady Wen Qing could aid us at this time and care for my senior quickly.”

Lan SiZhui felt like his face was on fire and his hands were shaking. The lie felt thick and clumsy on his tongue and he was sure he felt his voice tremble as well. He never outright lied before, or at least he couldn’t recall an instance when he did. He deceived and let people make assumptions, but himself never really made an untrue statement before.

He was so sure the guard would be calling him out on it. He was sweating excessively, felt the cold dampness soak the back of his robes. The guards’ pause didn’t help, only amplified his anxieties.

“You’re wearing Jin weapons.” One of the guards nodded at the sword in Jin Ling’s hand with his chin.

“Ah, yes...” Lan SiZhui thought hard, but he couldn’t come up with a lie.

“We were attacked by Jin disciples.” Jin Ling said, tone annoyed. “They took our weapons and ran away. We picked these up from the dead, so we could have some protection on our way here.” He said with a roll of his eyes.

“Our, uh, our senior actually still has his sword.” Lan SiZhui added and gestured behind himself. Jiang FengMian, without prompting, stepped forward and raised Feixu so the red and silver sheath and the black corded handle was obvious, even from that distance.

“What’s the name of the sword?” One of the guards asked.

“Feixu.”

“Wait here.” The guard nodded, then turned and went inside. The other guard had his hand on his sword, eying them. It didn’t take long, only a minute, for the other one to appear again, then he bowed. “Senior Wen, please, follow me inside.”

Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with Jin Ling. They didn’t expect to be invited this easily. Did the guard tell someone the owner of Feixu was here? What did that mean? Someone recognized the name? Someone knew the owner of the sword? Were they expecting a fallen friend back from the dead?

They cautiously followed the guard inside, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui helping Jiang FengMian, while Madam Yu was walking ahead of them, head held high, fists clenched.

“Wait here.” They were instructed right away. Soon, two guards returned with a bright-red robed figure between them.

“Seniors, I’m sorry, but we cannot house you today!” Wen Qing called out before she even reached them. “Maybe it would be best...” She trailed off as she noticed Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling. The two of them bowed to her.

“Lady Wen, thank you for letting us inside your supervisory office.” Lan SiZhui said once they straightened. Wen Qing watched him with furrowed brows. “Lady Wen, we’re sorry for the inconvenience. We were hoping you could house these seniors and their two disciples for a few days while we recover from a recent night-hunt.”

“You’re hurt?” Wen Qing’s eyes immediately went to Lan SiZhui’s leg.

“Not worse than last time we saw each other.” Lan SiZhui smiled. “However, I’m afraid my senior’s wound is serious and it needs immediate attention.” He gestured at Jiang FengMian. Looking at him, Wen Qing’s frown deepened, then her eyes widened, immediately jumping back to study Lan SiZhui with a disapproving expression.

“La—Cousin.” Wen Qing said sternly. “You know I do not appreciate when you act so rashly.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui bowed his head. “I apologize for the trouble I bring to you.”

“And you?!” Wen Qing turned to Jin Ling.

“What about me?” Jin Ling frowned at her.

“Why did you come?”

“La—Si—Your cousin said you were smart. Why don’t you figure it out yourself?!” Wen Qing huffed, looking back at the two Sect heads behind them, frowning.

“What do you expect me to do here, cousin?!” She turned sharply to Lan SiZhui.

“Lady Wen, last time, you said you don’t care about politics. That you’re a doctor and your priority is to care for your patients. I’m asking you to keep that in mind and take the four of us as your patients and guests.”

Wen Qing studied him for a long time, then huffed. She turned to the servants surrounding them. “Prepare rooms for them! Prepare the infirmary as well.” She barked the orders sharply. Then she turned back to Lan SiZhui. “Are all of you in immediate need for medical attention?”

“We’re all worse for wear, but Ji—my disciple mate and my senior are severely injured.”

She nodded sharply. “Follow me.” She said, then turned and with a brisk pace led them deeper into the buildings of the office. She led them to the infirmary, where she instructed two girls who were waiting for them for medical supplies. She directed Jiang FengMian and Jin Ling to take a cot each, then she seemed to stop. She eyed Lan SiZhui’s makeshift bandages carefully.

“Girls, leave now. My cousin will help me out, he needs to learn anyways.” She told the two girls, who looked hesitant, but then nodded, bowed and backed out of the room. As soon as they were gone, she snapped the doors closed and activated a silencing talisman. “Lan SiZhui, come here.” He did. “Hold his thigh steady. Stronger. Good. I’m going to remove the bandages now.” She worked quickly, not paying any attention to them at all as she worked. The wound was soon exposed and Madam Yu tensed behind them.

“I suspect the arrow pierced a major vein.” Lan SiZhui told Wen Qing.

“I’m a doctor, I can see that. Here.” She picked up a prepared vial and handed it to Jiang FengMian.

“What is that?” Madam Yu asked sharply.

“Sedative, so he doesn’t feel when I’m digging around in the wound.” Wen Qing told her, seemingly not bothered by the mistrust.

“No.” Madam Yu glared.

“Madam—” Lan SiZhui started, but Wen Qing was faster, glaring back at Madam Yu.

“Would you rather listen to his screams and chance me doing more damage when he trashes around?! It’ll just knock him out, not kill him. I’m a doctor, not an assassin.” She said, then

turned her sharp gaze at Jiang FengMian. He nodded and drank the vial before Madam Yu could protest further. Soon, he was asleep, relaxed and pale.

“Detail what you’re doing at every step.” Madam Yu demanded.

“I can do that, or I can make sure your Sect Leader doesn’t bleed out.” Wen Qing snapped back, then started cleaning the wound. Jiang FengMian twitched, but didn’t stir. Madam Yu looked murderous.

“What did you just do?!”

“Lan SiZhui, there’s a needle—Yes, thank you.” She took the thread and needle Lan SiZhui handed her, ignoring Madam Yu entirely. Then she dug around the wound, taking her time with the surgery. It went smoother than Lan SiZhui expected and soon the bleeding stopped. Both his and Wen Qing’s hand were covered in blood as she finished her final stitches. “He will sleep for another hour.” She said, sighing heavily. “Once he wakes, we’ll know if it all went fine.”

Madam Yu was not pleased. Her expression was tight, her eyes wide and full of fury as she looked at Wen Qing. She didn’t pay her any attention. She instructed Lan SiZhui to wash his hands, then they went over to Jin Ling, who eyed them with suspicion.

“You won’t dig around inside me, will you?” He glared at Wen Qing.

“Great, there’s two of them.” Wen Qing muttered under her breath. Lan SiZhui was sure she didn’t intend on him to hear it, so he did his best to hide his amusement. “No, your wound is infected and deep but the sword didn’t do serious internal damage.” She told him, then offered the sedative to Jin Ling as well, who took it with a shrug. Lan SiZhui only had a moment to wonder since when did Jin Ling decide he trusted Wen Qing more than Madam Yu. He thought the boy would put up more of a fight. They quickly stitched him up, then Wen Qing looked over at Madam Yu. “Will you let me treat you?”

“No.” She answered with a finality in her voice.

“Fine.” Wen Qing nodded, having expected the response. She picked up some bandages and a water bowl, putting it harshly on the table beside Jiang FengMian’s bed that held the equipment for the surgery previously. “I’d offer you medicine as well, but it’s too precious to have you pour it between bushes.” She told her, then with an arrogant air, turned away from her. “Lan SiZhui, come.” She didn’t wait for his response, simply led him through the infirmary to a room to the side that only had one bed. It must’ve been some kind of private section.

“Will Sect Leader Jiang be fine?” Lan SiZhui asked once Wen Qing closed the door behind them.

“Do you think I did a bad job of his wound?!” She glared at him.

“No, that’s not—”

“Then stop questioning me. Sit.” She pointed at the cot. Lan SiZhui sat.

“Lady Wen, thank you for—” Before he could finish, Wen Qing silenced him with a furious look.

“What are you doing here with Sect Leader Jiang?!” She demanded.

“Lady Wen, I—”

“Are you stupid or do you want to kill me?! And who’s that woman?!”

“Madam Yu, Sect Leader Jiang’s wife.”

“So not only one, but two Sect heads are hiding from Wen Chao here?!” She glared at him.

“Lan SiZhui, you truly want to kill me!”

“Lady Wen, I didn’t have any other choice.” He said earnestly.

“Call me Wen Qing, since you’ve officially claimed your place as my cousin.” She sighed, shaking her head. “I want them gone, all of them.”

“They’ve been injured in the battle. They need your help.”

“You’re not allowed to ask for my help!” She snapped.

“I don’t know where else we should go.”

“Go to Gusu, for all I care!”

“The Lan can’t fight the Wen again.”

“Then to Lanling! They’d have shelter there since Jin GuangShan is cooperating!”

“Sect Leader Jiang had just been there.” Lan SiZhui looked down. “He returned alone. I doubt they’d help.” Wen Qing huffed, annoyed.

“Get your robes off.” She ordered, then went over to a shelf and started looking through some vials. Lan SiZhui didn’t dare to protest, so he shed his layers. Wen Qing pushed him properly on the cot and lifted the fabric of his trousers away from his leg. She examined him, watching closely every flinch Lan SiZhui gave. Despite the break having healed somewhat, his leg was still sore. After a day of running around, it was painful and Wen Qing sighed, as if disappointed in him.

“The healers in the Cloud Recesses said I needed another month to heal.” He said quietly. Wen Qing nodded.

“Maybe a little more, now that you put weight on it so carelessly.” She said as she looked through some vials. “Here. This should help with the pain. You should also rest for a few days. Don’t move around much unless you want to have a permanent limp.”



“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui took the vial and drank it. Wen Qing then examined his upper body for the injuries he got during the battle.

“These should be fine after a bath.” She said as she put some ointment on some of his shallower cuts. She then looked at the deeper wound on his arm, frowning as she dug around for some cleaning supplies. “This will heal slower. You didn’t put any effort into mending it properly.”

“I exhausted my Golden Core.” Lan SiZhui admitted.

“I figured.” She grumbled as she was done cleaning and started dressing the wound. “You’re lucky you still have one.” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“Did you hear about the battle in such detail?” He asked.

“What detail?” She asked distractedly.

“That Wen ZhuLiu hit me?”

“He hit you?!” She looked up at him sharply.

“Ah, it’s not that bad.” Lan SiZhui reassured. “He didn’t crush my Core.”

“I know that.” She glared. “Still you should be more careful, especially with him. Wen Chao had put a bounty on your head, did you know that?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head with his brows furrowed.

“After you helped take back Cloud Recesses, some people started talking about you. Wen Chao heard and so learned that you survived Dusk Creek mountain. He declared you as an official fugitive criminal of the Wen Sect. He said you’re a Wen who betrayed his Sect.”

Lan SiZhui swallowed thickly. He figured that much from when he heard Lady Wang saying so, and he suspected Wen Chao deemed him a criminal based on his defiance, but it was still shocking to hear it.

“I see.” He said quietly, and Wen Qing nodded.

“You see now, why it’s dangerous for you to be around the Wen Sect? If you get caught, I cannot save you. It will look like I’m helping you hide, since it’s known we’re cousins.” This also reminded Lan SiZhui of something.

“Lady Wen—Wen Qing,” he corrected at her look, “have you heard of Young Masters Jiang and Wei lately?”

“How could I have?” She clicked her tongue, annoyed. “A letter arrived not long ago to look for them as refugees as well. At this rate, we search for more people than we even have.” She said as she moved around the room, collecting things. Finally, she returned to the bed with a bundle of clothes. “At least they didn’t come here.” She said finally, walking away and turning her back to him, looking at the door. “Four wanted people are enough to hide away.”

“If they’d come, would you help them?” Lan SiZhui asked shyly.

“They wouldn’t dare to come here.” She shook her head. “They know how dangerous it is to go to the Wen just after the Wen also killed their family. They probably have more sense than you do, at least Young Master Jiang surely does.”

While they talked, Lan SiZhui stripped to his innermost layers and quickly pulled the black inner robe on. He noted with a furrowing of his brows that the design was different than what he usually preferred. They were not the elegant and formal free-floating sleeves of the Lan Sect, nor made of airy material due to having to put four layers on. It was a single inner robe made of thick, stiff material he was not used to, sewn to close around the wrists.

The two outer layers were just as strange and alien. The first layer was deep red, heavier and even thicker than the inner robes, though less stiff. It had black seams and flower motif woven into the fabric with a different shade of red, although it was so subtle one wouldn’t be able to see from afar. It also closed around the wrists in a fashion that made Lan SiZhui feel restricted and naked.

The outermost layer was just a simple, black, lace layer. The spacing of the pattern was airy enough that it would be obvious he was wearing red underneath it. On the end of the sleeves, where a wrist guard would normally sit and at the lapels where the robe closed, fine, black silk had been sewn and bright red flame motif had been embroidered onto it. The belt was also heavier than the GusuLan, also somewhat narrower, a leather strip, secured with bronze plated tie.

He felt uncomfortable.

“Thank you.” He said quietly. Wen Qing turned back to him, studying him before she looked away.

“It would be suspicious if a senior asked for medical care and I didn’t provide. Don’t thank me. You forced me into this.”

“Then accept my deepest apologies.” Lan SiZhui bowed solemnly. Wen Qing didn’t acknowledge him.

Wen Qing didn’t seem to have anything else to say, and she was at the door that led back into the infirmary when she paused, hands on the door but not opening them.

“Lan SiZhui,” she turned back, her gaze searching, “the guard at the gates claimed Sect Leader Jiang was carrying a sword named Feixu.” Lan SiZhui looked down, feeling guilty. He nodded. “Feixu was my uncle’s sword.” Lan SiZhui looked up, feeling his face twist into a pained expression. Wen Qing looked, for the first time, like the teenager she was. She had her back leaned against the door, her hands behind her back as she looked at the ground. “I remember than Wen ChanYu was with us in the Dusk Creek mountain cave. If you have his sword, that means...”

“It’s yours.” Lan SiZhui said. “If you want to take it back to his family...”

“He had a brother.” She said quietly. “Him and his wife are expecting their first child. Feixu was their family’s sword.”

“He should have it then.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Wen Qing looked up at him, studying him.

“Lan SiZhui, I never asked, but you claim you’re related to me.”

“I didn’t know my parents.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “They died before I got to even learn their names. I was taken away at that point and those who raised me never talked about them.”

“The Lan took you from Dafan?” She furrowed her brows. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“It was... It’s... complicated.” Lan SiZhui sighed. “I was raised by the Wen and only later, when I was around three or four, did the Lan take me in.”

“Keep the sword until you get yours back. Once you do, you can give it back yourself. I’ll make sure Wen XiaoQiang knows his brother had died.” She straightened up, done with the emotional conversation. She adjusted her clothes, then turned, opening the door and marching through the infirmary, out the doors which she closed behind herself.

Lan SiZhui looked after her for a long minute before he left the little room and settled next to Jin Ling, waiting for him to wake. Madam Yu watched him with sharp eyes, frowning. Her gaze was fixed on his robes, displeased and guarded.

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Both Jin Ling and Jiang FengMian were well enough a few hours later to retire to their own rooms, much to the relief of Madam Yu, probably. Lan SiZhui could feel her contempt from across the room while they waited for their respective relatives to wake and he had to admit, supporting Jin Ling into his own rooms felt just as a fresh breath of air as it probably did for Madam Yu.

Jin Ling was a little out of it, so Lan SiZhui left him to sleep off the effects of the sedative he got and returned to his own rooms to rest. The next morning he visited Jin Ling again. Thankfully, he was awake, so they could finally talk.

“You look like a Wen.” Jin Ling scoffed as Lan SiZhui entered. Lan SiZhui looked down at the Wen clothes Wen Qing borrowed him. She also said the previous night that they all had some waiting for them in their rooms, but Jin Ling hadn’t put his on yet.

“We have to play our part. Wen Qing also left clothes for you in the room.” He said simply as he activated some silencing charms. “Let me see your wound.” He requested as he looked around, spotting a bowl of water near the washing basin. He picked it up and with some more digging, found some bandages as well. Wen Qing said the bandages she put on should be changed regularly, and it was a good excuse to spend time with Jin Ling.

“So, was she mad?”

“She is very mad.” Lan SiZhui nodded as he sat on the edge of the bed and cleaned up Jin Ling’s wound. Jin Ling squirmed and hissed at times, but otherwise, let him. “But she will help us for now.”

“Good.” Jin Ling nodded. “Uncle and Wei WuXian?”

“They’re not here yet.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I don’t know where they might be. I hope they didn’t go back to Yunmeng.” Jin Ling pressed his lips together. They fell quiet while Lan SiZhui redressed his wound. “You should rest today and for some time. Don’t move around much.”

“Alright.” His easy agreement was testament of how unwell he must’ve been feeling, so Lan SiZhui got up and with promises to come back in the evening, he left.



It was two days later that Lan SiZhui was in Jin Ling’s room again, putting away the remainder of their lunch when there was a knock on the door. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look, then Lan SiZhui deactivated the silencing talismans and called out: “Who is it?”

“It’s Wen Ning, cousin!” He heard the familiar voice and his eyes widened.

“This isn’t even your room!” Jin Ling protested.

“Can I still invite him in?” Lan SiZhui asked anxiously. Jin Ling never liked Wen Ning, even after all the times they’ve fought beside each other. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure how Jin Ling felt about his cousin now, before he even committed those crimes.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, and Lan SiZhui opened the door. Wen Ning’s eyes widened as he saw Lan SiZhui.

“Brother Wen.” Lan SiZhui bowed to him.

“Ah, please, please.” Wen Ning shook his head. “Can I come in?”

“Sure. This hut is big enough to the three of us.” Jin Ling grumbled from the table. Lan SiZhui stepped aside. Wen Ning closed the door behind him and pulled out a silencing talisman from his sleeve, offering it shyly to Lan SiZhui, who took it and activated it.

“Senior Lan, Young Master Jin.” Wen Ning bowed to them.

“What do you want?” Jin Ling called over.

“Ah, excuse me for the intrusion.” He said with a blush. “My sister told me a cousin was here to visit and I wanted to meet him. I did not expect this cousin of mine to be Senior Lan. May I ask, how are we related?” He asked shyly. This was possibly the first time Lan SiZhui had talked to him since they’ve arrived to the past. They had met, when they went on that night-hunt on Biling Lake, but even back then they haven’t exchanged words.

The Wen Ning Lan SiZhui knew in the future was a reanimated corpse. He had his own thoughts and even some emotions, he possessed his memories, but... He wasn't the same. Not inhuman, Lan SiZhui never thought of him that way. He was a sentient being and just like that, he was considered a person for Lan SiZhui, but even he couldn't deny that he was not fully... normal.

Besides the obvious, that due to his corpse status he needn't to worry about worldly matters such as eating, drinking, sleeping and the likes, he was glaringly dead. He had a pale complexion, his hair lifeless, tangled and neglected. His clothes only mattered on the behalf of others, as to not flaunt around naked. He hardly had any facial expressions, though his eyes spoke for him a lot. His limbs were stiff and it took visible effort to make finer movements.

This Wen Ning was so different than the uncle he got to know, that Lan SiZhui, when he first saw him, almost didn't recognize him. He had his hair up, the shiny strands arranged in an elegant matter. His skin was flushed. His clothes were clean and well-kept. His whole demeanor was much livelier than the one Lan SiZhui knew. He hadn't any confidence, that was obvious from the way he held himself, but that also wasn't a surprise, considering not only did he have a low cultivation, but he was also very young – much younger than Lan SiZhui, if he remembered correctly.

“Uh, Senior Lan, is there something on my face?” Wen Ning asked suddenly and Lan SiZhui, realizing he was staring, turned his gaze away, bowing to him.

“I'm sorry, brother, I just didn't expect to see you.” He said lamely. Of course, they would meet, they were at his sister's headquarters. It was inevitable to run into each other – although Lan SiZhui hadn't expected that Wen Ning would be curious to see him.

“Excuse me for being noisy, Senior Lan.” Wen Ning blushed. “If you wish me to go, I'm not offended.”

“You're already inside, what does it matter now?!” Jin Ling snapped from behind them. “And didn't you come here to get to know your cousin?!”

“Ah, of course, Young Master Jin. I'm very glad to see a cousin. I'm really thankful it's Senior Lan! I would've never had the honor of getting to know him if not for this.”

“Alright, alright. That's enough adoration, Lan SiZhui will grow a big head.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes and Lan SiZhui repressed a grin

“How long will you stay?” Wen Ning asked eagerly.

“Wen Qing wants us gone already, so not long. Probably until I'm fit to travel again.” Jin Ling frowned, cradling his stomach tenderly.

“Mn. We should meditate so you can heal faster anyhow. Even if we leave the supervisory office, we won't leave YiLing.” Lan SiZhui told him and Jin Ling nodded. There was a pause where Jin Ling prepared the room for meditation, and Lan SiZhui looked over at Wen Ning, wanting to make some talk while Jin Ling moved around the room. He didn't ask if he could

help, he knew what the answer would be. “Your sister is very kind for letting us stay and helping our guests as well.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning smiled. “Sister is very kind.”

“Are you... Sorry, may I ask how old are you?” Lan SiZhui asked uncomfortably.

“Almost fifteen.” Wen Ning smiled. “I have a low cultivation, so I am doing medical training.”

“Do you like it?” Lan SiZhui asked curiously. The Wen Ning he knew had a surficial knowledge about medicine, but certainly more than the basic training cultivators got.

“I’m not very good at it.” Wen Ning admitted shyly. “I... I’m very grateful for the opportunity to learn it, but I like archery better.” He admitted with a deep blush.

“Archery?” Lan SiZhui was surprised. The Wen Ning he knew never mentioned archery. Although by then he was a fierce corpse without the need of such skills.

“Mn. Although I’m sure I’m not nearly as good as Young Master Jin. I don’t have formal training.”

“You don’t need formal training to be good at something.” Jin Ling said for the first time since he started putting the room in order. “You just need dedication. If you don’t have that, there’s no point doing it at all.” He said biting. Lan SiZhui was sure he hated to have to talk to Wen Ning like he didn’t have a deeply rooted hatred towards him.

“You don’t want to learn it?” Lan SiZhui asked Wen Ning instead.

“My sister doesn’t think I’d have use for it...” Wen Ning admitted. “There’s not really a point in training me professionally. I’m content to just do it in my free time though!” He smiled. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to say to that. “Ah, Senior, may I ask how we’re related?” Lan SiZhui looked down, unsure how to answer.

“I, uh, I was born into the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect.”

“We truly are cousins then!” Wen Ning beamed at him, then his smile faded. “But... how come I’ve never heard of or met you before?”

“My parents died when I was very young and very soon I was... adopted.” Lan SiZhui didn’t bother to explain the finer details, seeing that Wen Ning must know his family well. It was risky enough to tell him he lost his parents, for Wen Ning might get suspicious he hadn’t heard of such incident in his family.

“I see.” Wen Ning pressed his lips together, bowing his head. “But we found each other again.” He looked up with a hopeful smile. Lan SiZhui returned it tightly.

“Well, Lan SiZhui and I are both injured and we need to meditate.” Jin Ling snapped from the side. When Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw that he’d already prepared the room for their

meditation. “Please, leave now.” Lan SiZhui blinked at the rude request, but he didn’t correct Jin Ling. After all, they were in his room.

“Of course, I wouldn’t want to disturb Senior Lan and Young Master Jin.” Wen Ning was quick to bow in apology and Lan SiZhui frowned, finally understanding what Wen Ning meant when he asked Lan SiZhui not to call him uncle.

“Wen Ning, we’re cousins. Please, call me Lan SiZhui, or brother Lan, if that makes you feel more comfortable.”

“Ah, Senior Lan, I really don’t want to be disrespectful—”

“How are you disrespectful?!” Jin Ling snapped. “He just asked you to call him on his name. Can’t you see you calling him Senior Lan is what makes him uncomfortable?”

“I apologize.” Wen Ning bowed again, face aflame in a blush. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Don’t mind him, brother Wen.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Jin Ling’s words might be harsh, but he just wants to help.”

“Who wants to help the Ghost—” He bit off the rest of the title, shaking his head and looking away.

“Young Master Jin, thank you for looking out for brother Lan.” Wen Ning said with a small smile.

“Whatever! Get lost already, can’t you see we’re busy?!”

“We’ll talk soon.” Lan SiZhui smiled at Wen Ning, who nodded, returning the smile. He bowed to them both before leaving, Jin Ling letting out a sigh after the doors closed behind him.

“I don’t like that guy.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him tightly.

“So, you wanted to meditate.” Jin Ling said with a pained expression and Lan SiZhui’s next smile was more genuine.



Another three days went by, marking it the fifth day Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui and the Jiang Sect heads had arrived to the supervisory office. Since that first day, they haven’t heard from Jiang FengMian, nor Madam Yu, but Wen Ning came by occasionally and when Lan SiZhui asked, he told him they were still here. This reassured Lan SiZhui, who was afraid that the seniors might go back to Yunmeng and risk their lives.

Wei WuXian and the Jiang siblings never arrived. While it reassured Lan SiZhui, who assumed the three were following their parents’ orders and went to Meishan, Jin Ling got more and more nervous each day. When Lan SiZhui asked why, he refused to answer.

It was just after breakfast in the morning, and Lan SiZhui was looking for Jin Ling. He didn't find the other boy in his rooms. Lan SiZhui walked around the grounds, hoping to run into him, but he didn't see him anywhere. A guard around the gates stopped him and asked what he wanted.

"Walking around like this, you make me nervous, brother Wen." The guard said, narrowing his eyes at him.

"Ah, brother Wen, I'm sorry. I'm looking for my fellow junior. Have you seen him?"

"Yeah, he left an hour ago."

"Left?!" Lan SiZhui's eyes widened in alarm.

"He asked where he could practice with an arrow around here. I pointed him towards the training grounds just east from here." At that, Lan SiZhui let out a relieved breath. He thanked the guard and followed his instructions towards the training grounds.

Jin Ling was alone. Lan SiZhui stopped at the edge of the grounds, watching him on the clearing. There were targets set up some paces away, which were clearly for sword practice, but that didn't stop Jin Ling from using them as arrow targets.

He was a peculiar sight. Lan SiZhui had never seen him use a bow and arrow quite like this before the battle of Lotus Pier. The general rule was, ordinary objects couldn't be used to channel spiritual energy. The tool, be it a flute, a sword or just a brick, had to be made with spiritual energy.

Lan SiZhui wasn't a tool maker, so he only knew the generics, not the specifics, but he knew that unless an object is made with or from a material that is able to host spiritual energy, it would be useless in a cultivator's hand. Live things could be made into spiritual tools, such as Wei WuXian had cut that bamboo into a flute on Dafan mountain so long ago. Things like processed wood lost this ability, so unless the bow was made of a live tree and never even got dipped into oil, it shouldn't have been able to accommodate spiritual energy.

Unless it was made with it, which it wasn't. Bows weren't spiritual tools. It was mainly because they were not considered weapons. An arrow, yes, if one was to only use one arrow all his life, it could be a spiritual tool, but there was no use in making a bow into one, for there was very little way to use them effectively as weapons. They weren't using Qin language, they didn't have a blade. Just like one wouldn't make a folding fan into a spiritual weapon, one didn't make a bow either.

And he knew Jin Ling's bow. It was still the same one he stole from the Jin disciples back in the Cloud Recesses during the guest lectures. The day he showed up with it, Lan JingYi questioned where he got it from. Jin Ling told him it was one the Jin didn't use anymore, because they had trouble attaching strings to it, but he figured it out and so he claimed it as his own.

It was an ordinary bow. A common sight in Jin Ling's hand as well – ever since Lan SiZhui knew him, he unsheathed Suihua about as many times as many fingers Lan SiZhui had on



one hand, but he used his bow as excessively as others used their swords. Everyone knew Jin Ling's primary weapon was a bow and he only used Suihua if spiritual energy needed to be used. There was nothing special about Jin Ling using such a common bow. So why was he able to channel spiritual energy through it so effectively?

Jin Ling was seemingly testing it out for himself as well. From how he moved, it was obvious he was incredibly talented with a bow, but that he wasn't used to using it as a spiritual weapon. He was testing it out, seeing how he could use it, and Lan SiZhui let himself lean against a tree and study this phenomenon himself as well.

First, Jin Ling shot arrows. One, three, once even five at the same time, jumping, crouching, spinning, dodging unseen enemies as he shot. Every time the arrows were accompanied by spiritual energy. Then he tossed the quiver aside, once it was empty. First, he used the bow as if it was a bamboo pole, holding it lower than if he was to use it to shoot, hitting the target from this side or that. The spiritual energy was weaker like this, but still definitely there.

Then he went back to draw his bow – but without an arrow! The moment he let go of the string, spiritual energy shot out, not unlike if he was shooting an arrow, knocking the target to the ground. After a few exercises like that, Jin Ling finally lowered his arms, panting as he glared at the destroyed targets in front of him.

“Jin Ling.” He called out and Jin Ling turned, alarmed, already drawing the bow without an arrow, aiming straight at Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui didn't move. After a moment, Jin Ling huffed, lowering his arms. He looked down at the bow in his hands and shook his head.

“I don't understand.” He said. “It's just a bow.” He paused, turning away. He headed to a rock nearby. “Look. I asked a servant earlier and came out to practice.” He said as he leaned his Jin bow to the rock and picked up a red-and-black practice bow from the ground next to it with a full quiver. He swung the quiver on his back, then went back in front of the target. He drew an arrow and shot. Then he drew three others, turned, and shot again, but other than hitting the center or nearby every time, nothing else happened. He turned back to Lan SiZhui and spread his arms. “See?”

“Mn. It must be something about this bow.” He pointed at the Jin bow. Jin Ling nodded.

“But what? There's nothing special about it. I never even heard of spiritual bows before! Have you?!”

“I can't say I have, but it's not impossible.”

“It isn't?”

“Some part of it must have been made to accommodate spiritual energy.” Lan SiZhui stepped away from the tree and closer to the bow. “May I?”

“Whatever.” Jin Ling waved a hand at him. Lan SiZhui picked up the Jin bow, letting his spiritual energy flow freely as he examined the spiritual channels in the body of the bow, but he was surprised to find nothing. Then he realized every time the spiritual glare seemed to come from the string and examined that as well – aha!

“What string is this?” He swiped a finger over it. It felt overly smooth for a bowstring, but then, Lan SiZhui hadn’t held a bow since his mandatory archery training at sixteen was over.

“I asked some Lan disciples for one.” Jin Ling said, then explained: “When I found the bow, the string kept slipping off. I tried to make an endless loop, but it didn’t work. I looked at some bows from other Sects, but only the Lan had a small enough looped string I thought would work, so I asked some disciples if they could give me a bowstring.”

“Hm.” Lan bowstrings, as far as Lan SiZhui knew, were not made to accompany spiritual power, nor were they made of different material than other bowstrings. “Can you tell what’s the difference between the Lan string and the Jin, or even the Wen?” He nodded towards the bow in Jin Ling’s hand. He ran his finger over the Wen string, then shrugged.

“It’s a bit smoother than usual and there are less threads, but otherwise, it seems just like a regular string.”

“Can you take it off?” He asked, handing back the Jin bow. Jin Ling made a face at him but complied. He handed over the string. It seemed to be one solid strand at the ends with loops on each of it, and a single strand in the middle, but otherwise, the rest was made of separate threads. Lan SiZhui had never examined a bowstring closely before, so he wasn’t sure if that was normal.

He studied the threads closely, then had a sudden idea. He pinched a thread between the fingers of one hand, index and middle finger holding one end, thumb and fourth finger the other. It was an uncomfortable position as he stretched it as far as he could, then he raised it to his ear, plucking it.

“Strange.” Lan SiZhui hummed as he lowered the string.

“What?” Jin Ling frowned.

“It... sounds a little like guqin strings when plucked freely.”

“You can tell?” Jin Ling looked skeptical. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Guqin strings are made of silk and have a distinguishable sound. Also, I put some spiritual energy into it and it reacted to it like a guqin string would.”

“So...” Jin Ling took back the string when Lan SiZhui offered it to him and applied it back onto the bow. “My bowstring is actually made of guqin strings?”

“I... think so.” Lan SiZhui eyed the bow. “I didn’t know Lan bowstrings were made of silk and with spiritual energy.”

“Hm.” Jin Ling huffed, rubbing his finger over the polished wood. “Try it.” He said, handing the bow over. Lan SiZhui hesitated, then took it from him. He wasn’t practiced with the bow. His primary cultivation was musical and he relied more on his sword. Every disciple received training in every weapon, but once they chose their own, they needn’t to keep practicing with others.

He unsurely picked up an arrow and turned towards the straw targets set up, drawing the bow. Before he could shoot, Jin Ling clicked his tongue and stepped closer, pushing the arm that drew the string down, so his elbow was more in line with the ground. Lan SiZhui felt his cheeks redden as he shifted, concentrating back on the target.

He fed some spiritual energy into the string as he released, but unlike what he'd been expecting, no spiritual energy left the bow. He lowered the weapon and looked at Jin Ling with a tight expression.

"Maybe I'm doing it wrong." He proposed. Jin Ling huffed, turning away from him, but then he froze. Lan SiZhui looked at him questioningly, then followed his line of sight. There, behind them, behind one of the trees, he saw a person standing farther away. He was trying to hide behind a tree, but it was too narrow to actually cover him and much of his red-black robes were showing.

Jin Ling reached over, taking his bow back and aimed at the tree before calling out: "Who's there?!" The person behind the tree flinched, then after a short pause, he turned to peek out at them. Lan SiZhui just got a glimpse of Wen Ning's face before he attempted to hide behind the tree again. Jin Ling lowered his bow, his hand tightening on it, an angry expression on his face. "Wen Ning. What are you doing here?" He called out.

Wen Ning peeked out again, hesitated, then finally stepped out from behind the tree. "Ah, sorry." He bowed deeply. "I didn't mean to spy! I was just coming out to practice when I noticed you here. I'll be going now!" He said quickly and bowed again before turning back towards the supervisory office.

"Wait!" Jin Ling called out after a moment. Wen Ning froze. "Come here." Jin Ling ordered coldly. Lan SiZhui looked over at him with a warning look; he didn't want Jin Ling to bully Wen Ning over something he didn't even do in this time yet. Jin Ling avoided his eyes as Wen Ning came closer.

"Yes, Young Master?"

"You practice archery, right?"

"Ah, yes, Young Master." Wen Ning nodded eagerly. Jin Ling nodded as well and gestured him over. Wen Ning looked at Lan SiZhui unsurely before going over. Jin Ling looked over him critically, then nodded towards the bow in Wen Ning's hand.

"Show me."

"Y-Young Master?" Wen Ning asked unsurely. Jin Ling's face pinched in annoyance, but before he could snap, Lan SiZhui also spoke.

"Brother Wen, would you please show us your archery skills?"

"Ah, Senior—Brother Lan, I'm not that good and I'm not trained either. I wouldn't want to waste your time and disturb your practice."

“I just asked you to do it. How is that wasting my time or disturbing me?!” Jin Ling glared at him. Wen Ning swallowed and nodded. Clumsily, he prepared his bow and arrows. The whole setup took several minutes, which Lan SiZhui suspected was more because of the nerves and not because it required that much time. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui both stood behind Wen Ning while he did it, Jin Ling watching him with his arms crossed over his chest.

Wen Ning drew an arrow. It took him some time before he released it. It was a good shot, even if it didn’t reach the center, it was closer than Lan SiZhui could shoot. Wen Ning turned to them with a hopeful expression, but Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure what he was hoping for: that he was good enough, or that he was too bad and Jin Ling would send him away. Instead of either of these things, Jin Ling frowned at him.

“Again.” He said and Wen Ning’s face fell. He swallowed again, but then nodded and pulled out another arrow. It took less time to release it now, and it also didn’t hit the center, but it wasn’t farther than the previous one either. “That’s good enough.” Jin Ling said and he stepped forward, holding out his bow. Wen Ning eyed it with suspicion and surprise. “Shoot with this now.”

“Young Master—”

“If you ask me if I’m sure, or you want to tell me you wouldn’t dare, save it. I told you to do it, so do as I said.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui chided gently from behind them. Jin Ling pretended not to hear him and wriggled his bow. Wen Ning hesitated again, glancing towards Lan SiZhui. Before he could reassure his cousin it was alright, Jin Ling snapped again.

“Don’t look at him. Do as I said.”

“Ah, yes, Young Master.” Wen Ning bowed to him in apology, then put his own bow down gently. He took the Jin bow carefully and drew an arrow. This one was farther from the center, but still an excellent shot.

“Again. This time, use spiritual energy just as you release the string.” Jin Ling instructed. Wen Ning looked back with wide eyes.

“Young Master, you might not know this, but my cultivation is very low. I can’t even fly a sword.”

“Just do it.” Jin Ling waved the concerns away. Wen Ning pressed his lips together and nodded, then pulled out another arrow. Lan SiZhui watched closely, but unlike with Jin Ling, not even a hint of spiritual power flashed upon release. Jin Ling hummed. When Wen Ning offered him the bow back, he took it without even looking. “What do you think?” Jin Ling asked, turning to Lan SiZhui, who hummed thoughtfully.

“This might need further testing, but I believe this might be a technique only you can do.” He said, trumping down his bubbling excitement and pride – without being able to test this properly, they couldn’t know for sure, but the indication was enough to make Lan SiZhui impressed.

“Does this mean I found my own spiritual tool?”

“One of the most unique ones I’ve ever seen.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him, nodding.

“Should I name it?”

“Hm?” Lan SiZhui asked as he shook away his thoughts about other spiritual weapons.

“My bow.” Jin Ling clarified. “Every spiritual tool needs a name.”

“Mn. I think that’s a good idea. Do you have any names?”

“Not yet.” Jin Ling shook his head as he held out his bow in front of himself. “So, not only Wei WuXian can be special, huh?” He smirked smugly. Lan SiZhui didn’t comment, but turned back to Wen Ning.

“Brother Wen, thanks for your assistance.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning nodded with a smile. Even though Jin Ling scoffed at him at that, he couldn’t help it, his gaze kept returning to his bow in amazement. Lan SiZhui smiled, happy for Jin Ling.

“So, you’re well enough to practice, that must mean you’re well enough to leave, correct?” Came the feminine voice from behind the three of them, and they all turned to see Wen Qing standing on the path leading from the supervisory office to the training grounds.

“S-sister, please, don’t kick them out just yet.” Wen Ning stepped forward. “Young Master Jin still needs to heal before he’s well enough.”

“A-Ning, you don’t think I’m aware?” Wen Qing glared at her brother, who lowered his eyes. “I’m their doctor. I know full well nor Jin Ling nor Sect Leader Jiang are well enough yet.”

“Then why—” Jin Ling started, annoyed, but Wen Qing cut him off.

“Wen Chao has arrived to YiLing.”

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Wen Qing’s uncle: (温)蝉于 (Wēn) ChánYú: Chán: "cicada" Yú: “surname/to go/to take”

## Mortality I.

“Wen Chao has arrived?” Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a look.

“We need to get Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu out of here.” Lan SiZhui said. “They’ll be safer in Meishan.”

“What about Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng?” Jin Ling asked back. Lan SiZhui thought for a moment, then quietly said:

“I’ll stay here and wait for them. You go with Sect Leader Jiang and his wife to Meishan.”

“What are you even talking about?!” Jin Ling glared at him. “I’m not leaving you here! We’re all going to Meishan.”

“Jin Ling. One of us needs to make sure Young Masters Wei and Jiang are safe.”

“Why can’t it be me?” Jin Ling asked, clearly offended. Lan SiZhui repressed an annoyed sigh.

“You’re injured as much as Sect Leader Jiang. You wouldn’t be able to fight them. If I stay, I at least have a chance against them.” Not that he planned on fighting them, but this was their only option. Neither knew enough about this time to know why Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng came to YiLing, nor why Wen Chao threw Wei WuXian into the Burial Mounds.

“You, a lone person against an army?” Jin Ling laughed bitterly. “Lan SiZhui, you’re talented, but far from invincible.”

“Ah, brother Lan... I can help.” Wen Ning cut in from the side, stepping forward. “I’ll look for Young Masters Wei and Jiang, if you want. I went to Yunmeng after the battle, but they weren’t there, so I—”

“You went there?!” Wen Qing snapped suddenly, glaring at her brother, who looked guilty. “So, you didn’t go to pick herbs like you said you would!”

“Ah... Sister... I’m sorry.” Wen Ning looked down, blushing. “I knew you wouldn’t agree, that’s why I snuck out... But... Young Master Wei is my friend and he also saved my life once. I cannot just turn away when he’s in need of help.” Wen Ning looked up with what could be defiance in his gaze. Wen Qing’s hardened as well.

“You already repaid your debt, A-Ning.” She said, jaw tight. “You don’t owe him anymore.”

“Still, he’s my friend.” Wen Ning looked down, ears and cheeks reddening in embarrassment. “I don’t have a lot of friends, so it means a lot that he sees me as such as well.”

“Anyhow, as generous as it is from brother Wen to offer his help, if Wen Chao learned who you’re looking for, he might think you’re trying to help them. That would not be good for

you or your family.” Lan SiZhui reasoned gently before Wen Qing could chime in. Jin Ling huffed at that.

“Because Wen Chao won’t kill *you* the moment he sees you? Lan SiZhui, you’re so considerate with Wen Ning’s family, how about yours?” Jin Ling glared at him with disapproval. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked down. “How would Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun feel if they lost you?! What about Lan JingYi, or Wei WuXian even?!”

“Ah, I’m sure Young Master Jin would also miss you.” Wen Ning inserted from the side with a small smile.

“Don’t speak in my stead!” Jin Ling snapped, glaring at him. Wen Ning looked down. “Anyhow, you’re so quick to think about others’ family, yet you don’t stop to think about yours when you start playing the hero.”

“Jin Ling...” Lan SiZhui started, but before they could really start arguing, Wen Qing cut them off.

“Wen Chao will be here in an hour. You better start preparing to depart. I’ve already sent a servant ahead to prepare a boat for you in YiLing.” She looked over the two of them. “You can argue on the way to fetch Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu.”

Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exchanged a look, then nodded to each other. As they walked back to the supervisory office, Jin Ling refused to look at him though. They went in silence, then Wen Qing went to arrange transportation for them to the boat and the two teens went to fetch the Sect heads.

As expected, nobody answered the first knock on the door. Jin Ling looked annoyed, but he kept knocking. At the third try, he called out:

“It’s us! Let us in.” There was no answer, as expected. Lan SiZhui and him shared a look. “Madam, Wen Chao has arrived. We need to leave.”

There was another long pause before the door opened, revealing an annoyed Madam Yu. The two bowed to her. She glared at them without moving.

“Madam, my cousin is arranging us transportation to Meishan. We need to leave quickly to avoid Wen Chao.” Lan SiZhui said with what he hoped was a polite tone.

“So, he found us here as well. I wonder why is that.” She said with a sneer. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Wen Qing would be suicidal if she called him here.” He said. “It’s not her making. Wen Chao was always coming to YiLing, it was just a matter of time until he caught up with us.”

“And how would you know that?” Madam Yu narrowed her eyes at him and Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“Isn’t it obvious? He knows Wen Qing and Lan SiZhui are cousins. It was logical from him to come here. Anyhow, we need to leave. Wen Chao can’t find us here, or else he’ll kill Wen

Qing and Wen Ning for hiding us, and then he'll kill us for being here."

"My husband isn't well enough. So, five days ago it wasn't safe for him to travel but he is now, when he's feverish and can hardly stand?" She cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm not well enough to travel either, but we don't have a choice. I'm done arguing." Jin Ling glared, and for the first time, Lan SiZhui saw what kind of Sect Leader he would've become if he had the chance.

He didn't know why this moment was the one when he thought this, that Jin Ling would make a great Sect Leader. It's not like he wasn't doing his best before, but Lan SiZhui always felt him unprepared to take on this role. As he argued with Madam Yu, using a tone that indicated he was done with the conversation and with the Madam's attitude altogether, Lan SiZhui was reminded of Jiang Cheng in the future. It wasn't the harsh words and the attitude, that was always there. But even in the future where Jin Ling was Sect Leader, the other boy never had the confidence to order people around.

It often appeared he had, because he copied his uncle's snappish, overprotective and harsh nature. Heaven knows Lan SiZhui was on the receiving end of his care way too many times, especially since they've arrived to the past. But while Jin Ling pretended to be confident, while he told his elders he won't take a mentor like Lan XiChen had Lan QiRen until he turned twenty and took over the Sect properly, he was quite insecure and unsure of his decisions. It wasn't obvious, but the way he argued didn't have the same commanding tone Jiang Cheng had mastered in the future.

That's what he saw now, as Jin Ling talked to his grandmother. He wasn't just being his usual self, wanting to protect someone but didn't know how to express it, so he just yelled, hoping to intimidate people enough for them to do his bidding. That might've worked on Lan SiZhui, but Madam Yu was cut from the same cloth. Jin Ling tapped into something inside him, the same thing that made his uncle a great Sect Leader to the Jiang Sect despite him also being barely sixteen when he had to take over the duties.

Jin Ling was reassured that if Madam Yu didn't do what he asked her to do, he'd make her. Not because he was more powerful than her – though his new spiritual weapon was still waiting to be examined properly – but because no matter what, he'd not let Madam Yu or Sect Leader Jiang get hurt. It made Lan SiZhui sad in a small part. Jin Ling didn't have much family left and it was no surprise he was desperate now, to keep them alive. It also made Lan SiZhui proud to see Jin Ling like this.

"Get your things together. We'll be coming back to fetch you. Oh, and give Feixu back to Lan SiZhui." Jin Ling said once Madam Yu failed to respond to his earlier words.

"Why would I do that?" She frowned. Lan SiZhui was just as confused.

"Because he's well enough to use it by now. It's his sword. He needs it to protect us." Madam Yu glared at them, but then stepped back, picking something up from the side, then tossed it outside. Lan SiZhui barely caught the sword. Then the door slammed shut and Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui were left to look at each other with a displeased expression on both their faces. "Anyways." Jin Ling rolled his eyes. "Come. Let's get ready."



They met again about half an hour later outside their rooms. They were both still dressed in the borrowed Wen clothes, Jin Ling's bow and quiver slung across his back, his sword in his hand. Lan SiZhui had Hudie in a qiankun bag and Feixu in his hand.

The next time they knocked on the Sect heads' door, it was answered instantly. Madam Yu never changed into Wen clothes, staying in the plain clothes they bought to disguise themselves, but Jiang FengMian had Wen outer robes on, although it was clear he felt uncomfortable in them. He had a cane he leaned onto as they stepped out of the room. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling bowed to them.

"Boys. Are you alright?" Jiang FengMian asked with a soft look. Jin Ling rolled his eyes, looking away.

"Stop worrying about others. We're clearly fine."

"We'll be fine, Sect Leader." Lan SiZhui nodded with a smile that Jiang FengMian returned. Jin Ling clicked his tongue.

"Can we go now? Wen Chao could be here any minute. I have no desire to run into him again. I've only met him once, but that was quite enough of the man. I don't know how you could stand him during the indoctrination. I'd have stabbed him the moment he opened his mouth."

"Wen Qing is arranging us a ride to YiLing." Lan SiZhui said, ignoring Jin Ling's last comments. "She said wait for her here."

"And you just assume she won't keep us here in plain sight for Wen Chao to find us." Madam Yu said with a frown.

"My lady." Jiang FengMian chided gently.

"You might be content waiting around for your death, but I'm not." Madam Yu snapped.

"Wen Qing wouldn't betray us." Lan SiZhui said. "She risked her life taking us in and caring for us. If Wen Chao were to come by now, he'd see she helped us, even if it would be her end goal to keep us here until he arrived, Wen Chao is the kind of person who sees ulterior motives in every action. Especially with people he doesn't trust."

"Don't talk like you know him well. It's disturbing." Jin Ling scoffed at him.

"I'm just stating what I've learned during the Indoctrination about him." Lan SiZhui told him.

"Lan SiZhui's words are wise and sensible." Jiang FengMian agreed. "Lady Wen helped us. We shouldn't assume she was going to betray us, just because it takes her longer to come than anticipated." He looked pointedly at Madam Yu and Jin Ling. His gaze settled on the young boy. "With this attitude in life, you will have very few friends. There's nothing wrong with trusting someone." Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, knowing that was the bad thing to say. As he expected, Jin Ling immediately perked up at the words.

“Sect Leader Jiang, clearly, you’ve never been betrayed in your life. If you had, you’d know that’s not true. Sometimes people who you trust most turn out to be the people who could easily kill you without second thought.” His hand went to his throat. The wound from GuanYin temple had already healed and it didn’t leave a scar behind, at least not a visible one. After a few seconds, realizing what he was doing, Jin Ling huffed and pulled his hand away from his throat with a jerky motion.

“Oh, I’m sure in your fifteen long years you had quite a few betrayals to face.” Madam Yu sneered at him.

“I know what I’m talking about.” Jin Ling glared back at her.

“You’re just an unpleasant child.” Madam Yu clenched her jaw. “How would you know? You and Wen SiZhui walk around like you know everything. I ask you, where does that knowledge come from? How did you know Wen Qing would help us, and how did you know Wen Chao would come? If you knew, why did you take us here? We could’ve found a good healer on our way to Meishan, but you insisted coming here. Why?”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Jin Ling stepped forward, his grip tightening on his sword.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui warned quietly.

“Isn’t it you who comes up with the lies so easily?” She glared. “Just a few days ago the Wen soldiers questioned your Jin weapons and you told them a lie so easily as if it really happened. You’re quite the manipulator, aren’t you?” She seemed giddy to finally address this and call Jin Ling out, who frowned at her deeply.

“Madam Yu, I ask again that you think with your head. If I wanted either of you dead, I’d have plenty opportunity to kill you. Why would I bother conspiring with the Wen?! Didn’t I jump in front of the sword destined for Sect Leader Jiang?!”

“Madam Yu, enough of this. This is a series of unfortunate events, but it’s hardly the boys’ fault.” Jiang FengMian said with a strict look towards his wife.

“Sect Leader Jiang, why is it that whenever I say something you must go against me?” Madam Yu whirled on him, glaring at her husband. “You protect Wei WuXian and Wen SiZhui like they’re your own children, yet when your own son and wife have an opinion differing from yours, you argue.”

“Madam Yu, I understand your frustration and mistrust.” Lan SiZhui inserted earnestly. “But arguing about this won’t help anyone. Sect Leader Jiang is being kind, please, don’t scold him for that.”

“Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling huffed. As Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw Jin Ling rolling his eyes.

“He is my husband.” Madam Yu said with a sharp look. “I scold him for whatever I want. Don’t go poking your nose into this, Wen SiZhui.”

“Cousin.” Wen Qing said from the side, and when they looked over, they saw her walking towards them with Wen Ning on her heels. Lan SiZhui couldn’t help feeling relieved, not because they were alone, but because their presence meant they could finally get moving. “Do you want to die?” She asked as she got closer, glaring at Jin Ling.

“What?” Jin Ling jutted out his chin in challenge.

“Your voices can be heard all over the supervisory office. While I wouldn’t tell this to Wen Chao, I cannot say the same about the others present on the grounds. There’s a reason we talk about such matters behind closed doors.” She glared at them. Lan SiZhui felt his face heat in embarrassment at his carelessness and he bowed deep in apology.

“We apologize, Lady Wen.”

“Didn’t I tell you to call me by my name?” She huffed, then held out a bag for them. “Here.” Jin Ling took it and looked inside right away, which earned an eyeroll from the lady. “It’s medicine for the journey.” She said, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “Have you decided on what we’ve talked about?” Lan SiZhui assumed she meant if he was going to stay or not.

“We haven’t yet.” He shook his head. Wen Qing nodded, looking over him. Her eyes paused at the sight of Feixu. Lan SiZhui also looked down, the weight of the sword by now almost as familiar as Yingjiu’s. He looked back up at Wen Qing, who had a painful expression on and he held the sword out. That shook Wen Qing out of her staring and she shook her head, glaring at him.

“Didn’t I say keep it until you get yours back?! Make sure you keep your promise and return it to its family!”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui bowed. Wen Qing pressed her lips together.

“Let’s go.” She said as she turned on her heels and headed towards not the gates, but towards the back of the supervisory office. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look.

“Ah, our private quarters are this way.” Wen Ning said when he caught sight of the confused looks. “It’s best if you leave unseen.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui nodded and Wen Ning smiled at him.

There was a carriage waiting for them outside the back gates. Lan SiZhui and Madam Yu helped Jiang FengMian inside, who was quiet due to fatigue. Lan SiZhui could only hope he recovered soon. Him and Jin Ling turned to Wen Qing and Wen Ning then and bowed to them. Wen Qing pressed her lips together, but with a look at her brother, they also bowed.

“Take care of yourselves. And obey that this time around, Lan SiZhui.” Wen Qing said with a serious look. Lan SiZhui felt a blush as he nodded.

“Ah, cousin. If this is all over, visit us on Dafan Mountain!” Wen Ning asked with a beaming smile. “You can meet the rest of the family. And... perhaps you can pay your respects to your parents as well.” Lan SiZhui smiled and nodded.

“Right. Let us hope this will be over sooner than later and things go smoothly.” Jin Ling said as he and Lan SiZhui shared a look. With one last, parting bow, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling got on the carriage as well, then they were moving through the forest towards YiLing.

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Surprisingly, they reached YiLing without any issues. However, their driver was only hired for this journey, so they had to get to the docks on foot. The walk was no more than to the supervisory office, but much more unsafe as well. Already they noticed the Wen presence in YiLing. It was hard to miss.

There were soldiers in front of the inn and many walked around the marketplace as well. Scouts marched the streets. As the carriage stopped, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling looked out carefully, calculating their options.

“We can’t just march through the streets. They’d sure notice us.” Jin Ling said with a displeased frown.

“We’re in Wen clothes. Maybe they’d not bother us too much.”

“Two seniors and two disciples with Jin weapons and going out of YiLing instead of to the supervisory office?” Jin Ling snorted. “Lan SiZhui, don’t be naïve. They’re looking for us.”

“Then we split up.” Madam Yu said from behind them and the two boys let the curtain fall back to place as they pulled their heads back to look at her. “Me and Sect Leader Jiang will go to the docks right away, and you two follow us on a different route.”

“So you can leave us here?” Jin Ling snorted. “Right. Madam Yu, we’re not stupid.”

“We wouldn’t leave you.” Jiang FengMian spoke for the first time. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“It’s too risky for the two of you to be seen. Maybe...”

“Maybe?” Jin Ling prompted.

“Maybe I could distract them and—”

“No.” Jin Ling snapped, annoyed. “Lan SiZhui, didn’t we talk about this already?” He asked, clicking his tongue. “Stop playing the hero. You’re not sacrificing yourself. We go together. If they stop us, we’ll just tell the same tale. If they ask why we’re leaving, we’ll tell them we’re going back to Qishan.”

“It would be safer to split up.” Madam Yu said. “They know Wen SiZhui’s face.”

“His name is Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling snapped. Lan SiZhui shook his head at him, signaling not to bother correcting her. It didn’t matter. Madam Yu was right.

“How about Jin Ling and Sect Leader Jiang go along on their own? If anyone asks, they can tell the same tale. I’m too easy to recognize, with me being a criminal, they must know how

my face looks. Madam Yu will go separately. They're looking for a man and a woman, so if she goes with you two, they'll surely ask who you are. Besides, her clothes are not of the Wen's. She can pass as a civilian."

"And you?" Jin Ling glared at him.

"I'll be following you from afar. If they notice me and capture me, you'll still be safe."

"I'm not leaving my husband." Madam Yu glared at them. Jin Ling sighed.

"Madam Yu, I don't want you to do so either. Just act as if you're not with them and follow them at a leisure pace. Act as if you're a citizen who just happens to have business at the docks."

"It's a bad plan." Jin Ling told him.

"I don't have a better one." Jin Ling looked at him for a long time then, he got that look on his face like he had many times since they left Lotus Pier. It was a thoughtful expression and a painful one. One that suggested he wanted to tell something to Lan SiZhui, but didn't at the same time. "What is it?" Lan SiZhui prompted gently. Jin Ling studied his face for a long moment, then glanced at Jiang FengMian. He pressed his lips together and shook his head.

Lan SiZhui had a feeling whatever he wanted to say had something to do with history, so he didn't blame Jin Ling for not saying anything in front of the Sect heads. However, Jin Ling got this look quite a few times now and it started to bother Lan SiZhui. He couldn't even begin to imagine what Jin Ling wanted to say that was so hard for him to voice. It was unlikely this had to do with this point of history. Nobody really knew much about Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian's time here. Unless, of course, Jiang Cheng told Jin Ling about it at some point. It wasn't unimaginable, but at the same time, Lan SiZhui had a hard time believing it would happen.

However, he didn't have time, nor opportunity to pry the matter out of Jin Ling. They had to move. Lan SiZhui nodded and so they headed out. Jin Ling pushed the curtain aside and helped Jiang FengMian out of the carriage. "We'll meet at the docks. We'll wait until midnight. If one of us isn't there by then, the others are going to Meishan and the ones who didn't make it follow them at a later date. If someone gets captured, send a message via talisman and we'll go back for them."

With that, he let the curtain fall and him and Jiang FengMian walked away. Madam Yu and Lan SiZhui were both silent, then Madam Yu huffed, climbing out and following them. Lan SiZhui waited a few moments, perhaps a minute, before following.

He got out of the cart and looked around. Seeing the carriage driver tending to the horses, he walked up to him and paid him. The driver seemed thankful and ready to depart. He hopped on the cart and led the horses away right away. Lan SiZhui tried his hardest not to flinch when he saw a Wen soldier in front of a house. He took a deep breath, straightened his spine and headed towards a side street, hoping there would be less Wen soldiers there.

As he walked the side streets, there were, indeed, less soldiers there. He looked around a corner, getting a glimpse of the marketplace. He thought he saw Madam Yu around one of the stalls, but then a Wen soldier looked his way and Lan SiZhui looked away.

He crept around the side streets, avoiding eye contact with anyone he met on the way. He wasn't used to sneak around like that. In fact, he wasn't used to many things since they've arrived to YiLing and the constant anxiety of being found out was tiring. He wasn't Jin Ling with his clever lies, nor was he Lan JingYi who could always avoid punishment by dancing on the edge of rule breaking.

At one point, when he saw two Wen soldiers head his way, he stopped and pressed himself to a wall of a house. He let his head fall back, leaning on the wall fully as he looked up at the sky. It was heavy with rainclouds. They were towards the end of fall. It would soon start snowing in Cloud Recesses. He closed his eyes briefly, then took a deep, calming breath. He adjusted his hold on Feixu, then pushed himself off the wall, ready to go.

Just as he turned to continue his way down the side street, he noticed the two soldiers from earlier at the end of the street, heading his way at a leisure pace. Lan SiZhui turned back towards where he came from and headed that way instead. Jin Ling would wait for him until midnight. He had time to go in circles.

He barely passed five houses before two soldiers turned the corner in front of him. Lan SiZhui hesitated and looked over his shoulder. The two other soldiers at his back were still coming his way. He looked around. He could go between two buildings into the marketplace, but there were also many Wen soldiers walking around there. Still, he might be easier to miss in the crowd. With one last look around him at the four soldiers coming his way, he made his decision.

He cursed his clothes as he entered the marketplace. Because of the black lace top, it was harder to pinpoint him as a Wen, but there were fire motifs on the sleeves and the lapel. He kept his head down as he tried to blend in with the crowd. Many locals looked at him warily.

As he walked between the stalls, he kept stopping at shops, tinkering with goods he had no intention buying, nor interest in looking at. He kept glancing up and around him. He felt shaky with adrenaline as he tried to unnoticeably get out of Wen soldiers' way. He tried to act as casual as possible.

"Ah, Young Master, I don't think this is your style." He heard someone say and Lan SiZhui looked up, scared and alert. The person who addressed him was a kind faced man, smiling at him with his eyebrows raised. He was a local, not a Wen.

"What?" Lan SiZhui asked back sounding rather unintelligent and impolite. The man nodded downwards. Lan SiZhui looked down at his hands that had automatically picked something up when he stopped by the stall. There was a delicate, golden hairpiece in his hand. It was decorated richly with pearls and other gems. Lan SiZhui felt his face heat as he put it down.

"I think this might be more fitting for the Young Master." The vendor said as he reached out and picked up a silver hair ornament. It was an interesting design. It reminded Lan SiZhui of the hair pieces they sold in Gusu, ones Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun wore. It still had a

distinct design, unlike those of Gusu. It reminded Lan SiZhui of a squid's intervening tentacles, or the motif of fire. It wasn't like Wen Qing's fire ornament, but rather like Hanguang-Jun's low ornament.

"Ah, thank you, sir." Lan SiZhui said politely. "But I'm not buying anything for now." That was when he felt a presence behind him. Lan SiZhui hesitated. If he was to look back, he might face a Wen soldier and from so close, they might recognize his face. But at the same time, he had nowhere else to go. This part of the marketplace was crowded and two young maidens blocked the other side of Lan SiZhui, he was trapped between the man at his back and the girls.

"How much for this?" He heard an awfully familiar, lazy drawl and he felt his eyes widen and his heart start to beat frantically at the threat at his back. An arm reached out next to him and picked up another ornament.

"Ah, Young Master, you have a good eye for quality." The vendor complimented as he took the hair ornament. "This one was made in Yunmeng. The motif of Lotus is delicately carved into the metal, which was imported from the Unclear Realm. The pearls come from Gusu and there's even contribution from Lanling. You see these gems are not cheap, but real, rare treasures. The cost of it is one gold."

"A gold? For this cheap thing?" The man behind Lan SiZhui snorted. Lan SiZhui was frozen in place. "Say, vendor, you have many trinkets from other places, but aren't you living in YiLing where the Wen Sect provides you with great traffic? Where are then, I ask you, the treasures of Qishan? Why aren't you selling things your buyers would actually benefit from?"

"Ah, sir, I wouldn't dare dream of importing from Qishan." Now, the vendor seemed just as nervous as Lan SiZhui felt. "Their goods are too expensive and well-made to sell in my humble shop."

"Young Master Wen." Another voice said behind them. Lan SiZhui felt the man move to turn.

"What is it?" He drawled, annoyed.

"The supervisory office is ready to receive you."

"So, Wen Qing doesn't dare go against me so openly. I see." He hummed. "Alright. Let's go!" With that, Wen Chao turned, flicked his sleeves behind him and walked away. As he moved, his robes hit Lan SiZhui, but he didn't dare even breathe.

"Sir, will you be buying something?" The vendor asked and as Lan SiZhui looked over at him, he noticed the man looking at him. Lan SiZhui met his eyes with his own, frightened ones, then swallowed thickly, shook his head and turned to walk away.

He didn't even have time to feel relieved that Wen Chao had gone away, because the moment he turned, he found himself in a circle of people. They were standing in a circle because across from Lan SiZhui stood Wen Chao, Wen ZhuLiu behind him. They had their hands clasped in front of them, like they were just lazily standing there, watching a scenery. On the two sides from Lan SiZhui, at the edges of the circle stood two Wen soldiers.

The scenery they admired wasn't the marketplace though. Wen Chao had a smug little smirk on his face as he gazed at Lan SiZhui. The Wen soldiers to the sides had their swords unsheathed, aimed at him. Lan SiZhui froze again, looking straight at Wen Chao. The man, despite his smug impression, was ghostly pale. He had strikingly white bandages wrapped around his throat. He held himself somewhat stiff as well.

"Lan SiZhui." He drawled lazily. Lan SiZhui felt like a prey caught in a trap. The metaphor wasn't as much of a figure of speech as truth. "You can put on robes of the Wen Sect and take your forehead ribbon off, but in reality, don't you think I recognize you by now?" Lan SiZhui was unable to answer. All he could do was to stare. He knew he should be thinking of a way out, to get away, but he felt rooted to the ground. "Nothing?" Wen Chao sounded disappointed. "Not so clever with your tongue now?"

"Wen Chao." Lan SiZhui finally said, swallowing again. Wen Chao smirked at him. "Young Master Wen, how is your wound?" Lan SiZhui asked, partially because he was curious, partially to buy some time to think.

"Mn." Wen Chao's smile melted off as he glared at Lan SiZhui angrily. "I am here, aren't I? Clearly, you failed to wound me badly."

Lan SiZhui thought while Wen Chao talked. He could make a run for it, see if he could get away in the crowd, but he feared the Wen soldiers might kill the innocent. He could fight them, but despite there being only two guards in his sights, Lan SiZhui saw many more behind Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu. And there was Wen ZhuLiu.

"I hope Young Master Wen doesn't hold this against me." Lan SiZhui said distractedly. "I did what I had to, to get away."

"Lan SiZhui." Wen Chao drawled, loud enough to bring Lan SiZhui's attention back to him. "Don't think you can get out of my grasp now. I made a mistake last time but I won't make it again." He glared at Lan SiZhui. Then, he raised his chin and made a hand gesture. Lan SiZhui was confused by the action at first, but then Wen ZhuLiu stepped around his Young Master and Lan SiZhui's eyes widened. Wen ZhuLiu didn't move though, just looked at him. "What are you waiting for?! Crush his core." Wen Chao ordered behind him.

Wen ZhuLiu's head turned just a bit to indicate he heard Wen Chao. He looked indifferent, while Lan SiZhui's chest tightened and he took half a step back. He couldn't really get away though, because he bumped into the stall he was standing in front of just now.

Wen ZhuLiu stepped closer. Lan SiZhui pulled out his sword.

"Ah, that's how it's going to be?" Wen Chao snorted. "Lan SiZhui, you're alone while I have an army with me. What do you expect to happen here?" Lan SiZhui didn't answer. He kept his sword unsheathed and his eyes on Wen ZhuLiu. The other eyed his sword for a long time and didn't move. "What now?" Wen Chao snapped. "You aren't afraid of Lan SiZhui, are you?" Wen ZhuLiu's eyes met Lan SiZhui's. There was something in them. Almost like a question. Lan SiZhui tightened his grip on Feixu. If Wen ZhuLiu expected Lan SiZhui to put down his sword and give up without a fight, he had calculated wrong.



Wen ZhuLiu pressed his lips together, then unexpectedly, pulled out his own sword. Lan SiZhui heard Wen Chao laugh and exclaim in delight that if Wen ZhuLiu wanted to duel he was welcome to, but he hardly listened to Wen Chao's words, too concentrated on the immediate threat in front of him.

Wen ZhuLiu made the first move. He spun and let some spiritual energy seep out of the sword. Lan SiZhui dodged, sending an answering wave back. Wen ZhuLiu dodged, but his eyes widened, like he didn't expect Lan SiZhui to be able to use his spiritual energy. He stopped, straightening up and Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows at the other. Did Wen ZhuLiu give up after one swipe he even dodged? Lan SiZhui watched as Wen ZhuLiu looked down at his hand in confusion, then he clenched it in a fist, looking up at Lan SiZhui with a calculating look. Then he attacked again.

Lan SiZhui knew technically this wasn't a proper duel. For one, Wen Chao wasn't ethical. He'd send his soldiers at Lan SiZhui in a heartbeat, not caring if that would mean cheating. Wen ZhuLiu was also more powerful than Lan SiZhui. While the teen had a high cultivation, he couldn't match the others' years of experience. He was considered one of the most powerful cultivators in his generation, but when he was not measured against people his age, he was merely okay at best.

They sparred without caring though. Lan SiZhui could never fight multiple enemies well, so he ignored the Wen soldiers to the sides, concentrating on the bigger threat Wen ZhuLiu posed. They only exchanged five or six blows before Wen ZhuLiu applied a move Lan SiZhui wasn't familiar with, and the next thing he knew, a hand crashed against his breastbone and he landed a few meters back, his chest sore and his joints feeling like they were hit simultaneously. It was the same feeling he got when Wen ZhuLiu hit him in Lotus Pier.

Lan SiZhui groaned as the pain rendered him useless for a minute, rubbing his chest. It felt like he inhaled an unhealthy amount of water. His Golden Core was intact, like last time, but it was overwhelmed again, a little more so than last time.

He looked up, noticing he dropped Feixu and it now laid a few meters away from him. He looked up when Wen Chao moved to pick it up, studying the sword with a frown.

"Feixu. I knew the owner of this sword. One of my subordinates wielded it." He looked over at Lan SiZhui. "Did you kill him and took his sword?" He asked accusingly, but somewhat... proud at the same time. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath.

"You did." He said quietly, because that was all he could muster.

"What?" Wen Chao looked at him like he told him pigs can fly.

"He died in the Xuanwu cave. On Dusk Creek Mountain. You left him behind."

"Ah, I see." Wen Chao nodded. "You didn't kill him, just took his sword. Lan SiZhui." Wen Chao spun the sword once, then sheathed Feixu into its scabbard, handing it over to one of the Wen guards. He stepped closer, crouching next to Lan SiZhui, lowering his voice. "Let's

talk business, Lan SiZhui.” He said with a sweetened expression. “You’re a Wen. You have a Wen sword. We are just alike. Why are you still refusing to claim your place in this family?”

“I am nothing like you. My family is the Lan.”

“And where are they now, Lan SiZhui?” He asked, gesturing around. “If they cared for you like your birth family cares for our own, they wouldn’t have left you here to fight alone. Why didn’t you go to Gusu to seek shelter with Sect Leader Jiang and his wife? Why have you taken shelter in YiLing, where your cousin lives?” Lan SiZhui remained stubbornly silent. “Lan SiZhui. I’m afraid we cannot go like this for much longer.” Wen Chao told him. “I’ve tried again and again to give you a chance to do the right thing by your family, but still, you refuse to cooperate. My patience is running thin. So, one last time I ask you to be loyal and join us. If you still refuse, I won’t have a choice but handle you like the criminal you are.”

“Young Master Wen. While I think of my cousin in high regards, she’s not the family I grew up with. I’m loyal to those who took me in and cared for me. And even if I didn’t, I would never associate with the likes of you.” Lan SiZhui told him. Wen Chao watched him for a long moment, then nodded with a displeased expression.

“Then, Lan SiZhui, you left me no choice. Tell us where Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan are.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and remained silent. Wen Chao nodded, like he expected the response. “And where is the last shard of the Yin Iron?” Lan SiZhui frowned at that question.

“Young Master Wen, I already told you.”

“But I don’t believe you.” Wen Chao said. “Your cousin, Jin Ling, told us he knew how to get inside the place. I doubt he came to the conclusion on his own, so that means you also know the trick. If you knew it was in the Burial Mounds, you’d already have the shard.”

“Young Master Wen, don’t you think if we found it, we wouldn’t leave it in the most secure place we can put it? Where do you think that is?” Lan SiZhui frowned at him. Wen Chao glared for a long minute.

“You’re saying you left it in the Burial Mounds?”

“If we found it, surely, we would leave it there to keep it safe.” Lan SiZhui said with a nod. He wasn’t lying per se. He thought about this when they set out to find the shard at first, that if they found it in the Burial Mounds, it would be safer left there, where nobody could enter. But then they didn’t find it, so he needn’t to think about that anymore. He merely told Wen Chao what could’ve happened if they did.

“I see.” Wen Chao watched him for a moment, then his lips stretched into a slow smirk. “Lan SiZhui. Let’s make a deal.” Lan SiZhui eyed him in suspicion.

“No.” He said immediately. Wen Chao clicked his tongue, shaking his head in annoyance.

“You didn’t listen to my proposal yet, Lan SiZhui. You see, it is my task to find the fourth shard and I also promised JiaoJiao I’d bring Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu to her to have

her revenge. And I don't break a promise I've made. I offer you an opportunity. If you want to keep quiet about the whereabouts of the Jiang Sect's leaders, that's fine. In return, you bring the Yin Iron to me. If you don't want to bring the Yin Iron to me, that's also fine. But then I expect to hear about the Sect heads' location. Even though I should see you as a good-for-nothing criminal, I'm offering you this deal. Chose carefully. One or another, Lan SiZhui, you're going to have to pick."

"Young Master Wen." Lan SiZhui glared. "Even if I intended on finding the last Yin Iron shard, I still wouldn't give it to you."

"Not even in exchange of the lives of Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan?" Wen Chao raised his eyebrows. "I hear Madam Yu is an especially irritable person. Nobody would blame you if you resented her."

"Even Madam Yu would understand that I cannot let you have the shard." Lan SiZhui informed him. Wen Chao smirked, then chuckled darkly.

"You see the best in others. I admire that. But you know, during the past months I got to know you, I also learned something about you." He shook his finger at Lan SiZhui. "While you could gladly give up your own life for your secrets, you protect everyone else. I wonder, Lan SiZhui, what it would take for you to agree." Lan SiZhui watched him questioningly. Wen Chao grinned and gestured behind himself to the soldiers waiting for their orders.

Moments later the crowd parted again and a person was pushed into the circle of people. Lan SiZhui's eyes widened and he gaped. Impossible! Lan SiZhui pushed himself on his feet clumsily, but Wen Chao exclaimed in displeasure and the next moment he was pushed from behind onto his hands and knees. Then hands grabbed him under his arms and pulled him up, so he was kneeling.

"Brother Lan, I'm so sorry!" Wen Ning cried as he, too, was tossed on the ground. Lan SiZhui's face crumbled in a worried frown.

"Wen Ning..."

"Wen Ning followed you all the way from the supervisory office!" Wen Chao said in a theatric tone. "He hoped to aid his brother Lan, help him escape YiLing before I found you. Unfortunately, instead of aiding you, he got himself caught."

"Young Master Wen, I ask you to think clearly. Wen Ning is just a boy. Young and weak. He is innocent and has nothing to do with our issues with each other. No need to drag him into this."

"Did I drag him into this?" Wen Chao hummed. "I wondered where you could've gone. We have scouts in Gusu and Caiyi, but none seen you over there. We realized you didn't return to Gusu to hide Sect Leader Jiang there, so I thought to myself, where would Lan SiZhui hide such important people? Surely, they didn't go to Lanling, where Sect Leader Jiang was sent away from without aid. Qinghe is under siege by my brother, so that wouldn't be a wise choice either."

“Then I remembered that the only people you ever expressed you were close to were Lan and Jiang disciples... and your cousin, Wen Qing.” He spread his arms as if he was expecting applause or praise for his logic. Unfortunate for him that Lady Wang wasn’t here to hang from his every word. “So,” he turned back to Lan SiZhui, “I wonder. Was it me who dragged them into this, or was it perhaps... you?” Lan SiZhui didn’t dignify that with an answer, just kept glaring at Wen Chao.

“So, you see Lan SiZhui, I’ve tried to be nice to you earlier. I made you chose between the Yin Iron and the Sect Leaders. But you refuse to see reason, so I must force you to understand the stakes.” Wen Chao gestured at Wen Ning. “Pick one, Lan SiZhui, or else your beloved cousin dies.”

“Wen Chao, you’re going too far.” Lan SiZhui told him. “You claim you care about your family, yet you’re ready to kill not just me, but Wen Ning as well.”

“You’re a criminal.” Wen Chao said coldly, looking down at him on his nose. “I tried to convince you to take your place in your family and if you joined, you would’ve been cleared of your crimes. But you refused and with that, you tied my hands. Killing you now would bring honor to me and mine. And everyone who had associated with this criminal and helped him should be looked at as criminal as well.” He raised his voice, as if wanting to address the whole market. “Wen Ning admitted he was trying to help you earlier. It means he’s helping you. Killing him is like killing you.”

“Young Master Wen, you’re wrong. I haven’t seen Wen Ning in a long time.”

“Hm. Isn’t it one of the Lan rules not to lie?” Wen Chao raised his eyebrows. “He admitted to it. There’s no point denying it. And unless you want him dead, you have to pick one. So, what will it be? Will you tell me where Sect Leader Jiang is, or are you going to get the Yin Iron shard for me? If you fail or lie or trick me, Wen Ning will die. Make no mistake about it. Chose carefully.”

Lan SiZhui was quiet for a long time, watching Wen Ning. He knew he couldn’t give away Jin Ling’s position. Saving Jiang FengMian and him was more important regarding the turn of events. But at the same time, he’d lied about the Yin Iron. If he went to retrieve it, Wen Chao would surely not be understanding if he returned with empty hands.

“Young Master Wen. The YiLing Burial Mounds are dangerous. Even if I could get in, I’d need my spiritual power to stay alive. How do you expect me to find the shard in this state?” Lan SiZhui said at last.

“Well, that’s not my problem now, is it?” Wen Chao tilted his head to the side, looking at him with a sneer. “Lan SiZhui, if you refuse, I’ll have Wen Ning killed. Is that what you want?”

“Young Master Wen, you’re forcing him to commit suicide!” Wen Ning cried out, alarmed. Wen Chao snorted, not looking away from Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui watched Wen Ning. Young, alive and healthy. Lan SiZhui still had some of Lan JingYi’s talismans on him. Perhaps, he’ll stay alive long enough that Wen Chao will assume he died and left.

“I’ll do it.” He said quietly. Wen Ning looked back at him in horror.

“What was that, Lan SiZhui?” Wen Chao smirked.

“I’ll do it.” Lan SiZhui looked up at him defiantly. Wen Chao’s smirk turned into a frown and he narrowed his eyes at him.

“No tricks this time. Remember, it is not your life on the line now.”

“I am aware.” Lan SiZhui said. Wen Chao watched him for a long moment, then a smile appeared on his face once again.

“Good. Lan SiZhui. At the end, it’ll turn out you are loyal to your Sect after all.” Lan SiZhui clenched his teeth together in anger, but didn’t speak. Wen Chao nodded to the guards holding him down, then they all hopped on swords. Lan SiZhui was carried between two Wen soldiers, while Wen Ning was held by one. Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu led them above the Burial Mounds and Lan SiZhui’s stomach churned.

He hoped his plan would work. If nothing else, he still had his guqin. If he ran out of Lan JingYi’s talismans, he could use that to ward off resentful energy, once his spiritual energies stabilized.

There was an issue though. Wen Chao stopped them just above where the resentful energy could reach. “Here’s good!” Wen Chao called out. “Toss him!”

“Wait!” Lan SiZhui cried out at the same time as Wen Ning did.

“What? You want your last words spoken?” Wen Chao smirked.

“Young Master Wen. If you toss me in without my sword, how am I supposed to return with the shard?” He looked at Wen Chao with wide eyes.

“How do you expect to fly a sword without spiritual energy, Lan SiZhui?” Wen Chao raised arrogant eyebrows. Lan SiZhui calculated he’d stabilize his spiritual energy in a week if it was needed. While it was safer to wait for it to heal and return on its own, he could force the issue and regain his abilities soon enough. Wen Chao ought to know that, so Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Young Master Wen, how do you expect me to bring the Yin Iron to you if I’m stuck in the Burial Mounds? Unless you lied to me and have no intention keeping up your end of the deal. Didn’t you say you always keep your word?”

“Mn.” Wen Chao hummed thoughtfully, then looked over and gestured to one of the Wen soldiers who came with them. Moments later, he had Feixu in his hand again. “You want a sword to fly out?” He smirked meanly and held out Feixu towards Lan SiZhui, even though the boy was held by both arms and had no way of taking it. “Then here is your sword.” Lan SiZhui watched in horror as Wen Chao drew his hand back and swung the sword, letting go. It flew in a wide arch possibly miles away from where they were standing until Feixu disappeared in the dark mist of the Burial Mounds.

“No!” Wen Ning and Lan SiZhui cried at the same time again. Wen Ning was struggling in the Wen soldier’s hold, who wobbled dangerously. Lan SiZhui called out: “Wen Ning, stop!” There was a pause, Wen Ning stopping his struggling and looking over at Lan SiZhui with wide, frightened eyes.

“Lan SiZhui, you said you wanted a sword. Now, you will have it with you in the Burial Mounds. Who said I don’t keep my word?” Wen Chao said arrogantly.

“Young Master Wen, with Lan SiZhui’s spiritual powers gone, even if he had a sword, he wouldn’t be able to get out! Please, give him something else to escape with!” Wen Ning pleaded desperately.

“Who is he to earn so many things to aid him on this journey?” Wen Chao snorted. “He asked for a sword earlier, so I gave him one.”

“He just forgot he couldn’t use it anymore! Please, Young Master Wen!” Wen Ning had tears running down his face.

“Wen Ning. Stop complaining at once, or you might find yourself assisting Lan SiZhui.” Wen Chao said with a stern look.

“No!” Lan SiZhui cried out. “It’s alright, Wen Ning. I’ll find a way out to save you.”

“Brother Lan...” Wen Ning looked at him with a heartbroken expression. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and smiled tightly at him.

“It’s alright. I’ll be fine.”

“Ah, how very touching.” Wen Chao rolled his eyes. “If you want to keep your word Lan SiZhui, you better hurry.” Wen Chao grinned at him with the confidence of someone who knew Lan SiZhui wouldn’t be able to keep his word. Or any word here on out, for he’d die in the Burial Mounds. “Good luck, Lan SiZhui.” He smirked arrogantly, then nodded with his chin. The Wen soldiers who had been holding him let go.

Lan SiZhui was falling.

## Mortality II.

Lan SiZhui stared down at his hand, eyes wide as he watched the blood he just coughed up pool in his palm. The fall from the sword was far and he didn't have a smooth landing. He arrived on his side. His arm, at least, he was sure was broken. It was already swelling. A couple ribs as well, probably. Lan SiZhui also didn't know how long he'd been unconscious before he woke to the realization that he needed to apply Graveyard-Purging Talisman before the resentful energy got to him.

Even though there was little chance he could fulfill his plans now, he still didn't want to die, so he headed towards the safest place he knew in the Burial Mounds: the inner chambers of the Demon-Subdue Cave, where Xue ChongHai once, then Wei WuXian in the future, spent their days living.

His direction was largely guessed. He didn't know what way he landed, and he could've twisted in the air. While he made a point to try to memorize the lay from above the previous times he'd been in the cursed place and observing where they were floating from the Wen's sword, he could've started the completely wrong way and wouldn't know it.

He was also more than a little cautious of fierce corpses. All previous times they had entered, the moment their feet touched the ground, him, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi had been attacked by them. He could hit them, keep them away with the body of his guqin, even though the thought made him uncomfortable to damage his guqin like that. But other than that and a few spare talismans, he didn't have anything else to fight with.

The Burial Mounds were dry and lifeless as he struggled through the thick, dark resentful energy that rolled around him. Sometimes the wind whistled through the dead wasteland like whispers and screams. The resentful energy surrounded him, blocking his vision, weakening his talisman. He had to hurry. He didn't have more than a handful Graveyard-Purging talismans and he didn't have any spiritual energy to spare to feed into it. After fifteen minutes the one he previously applied was already weakening.

The first time he came across a fierce corpse, his heart raced and he froze on the spot, watching the grey face as it dragged itself across the pathway with a low moan. But the fierce corpse did not pay him any attention. It didn't even look his way, where Lan SiZhui was motionless, wide-eyed and didn't dare to breathe. They all ignored him the same way and Lan SiZhui's skin prickled as he wondered about this peculiar turn of events. He couldn't feel relieved they didn't pay him any mind, for he was uneasy about the reason why.

He walked for what seemed like several hours. He had to reapply his talismans at least four times. More than once he thought the surrounding area finally looked familiar, multiple times he felt relieved when he headed up a slope. Neither of those times was it the slope that led to the Demon-Subdue Cave.

He felt small, lost and cold. The negative energy surrounding him felt ruthless, the dark fog endless. No matter how far he'd gone, it was always there, caging him in, surrounding him.

He shivered. Without his Golden Core providing him heightened body functions, he felt like a child again.

It was always cold in the Cloud Recesses. It constantly felt like winter up there, but during winter, it was even colder. He always wore a heavy, thick outer layer as a child. He remembered he found it annoying, because it limited his movements. When he was still just learning the rules, his teachers used his restricting layers as a tool to help him learn proper posture and elegance.

This felt nothing like the chill he got at home as a child. This was not coming from around him, nothing reminded him of the clear, peaceful cold of the mountains. This cold came from within himself, chilling him from the inside. He felt that no amount of clothing would warm him up.

Lan SiZhui was tired. His injuries were severe, and while he pushed on, forcing himself to keep walking, he knew it was not long now that he would be unable to go on. His eyes were pinned on the path in front of him, watched the ends of his robes. The black lace was frayed at places, dirty and dusty. He tripped and righted himself, watching the unfamiliar robes dance around his feet.

He couldn't stop though. If he stopped now, he wouldn't be able to start again. He would sink on his knees and curl up in a useless ball of fear and desperation and he couldn't let that happen. He shivered, tripped, watched as a corpse fell and started crawling by its hands. The talisman he applied some time ago burned with a scentless, heatless flame. Ink-like fog crept towards him. Lan SiZhui closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He couldn't give up. Giving up would mean Wen Ning was dead. It would mean leaving Lan JingYi and Jin Ling to wonder for the rest of their lives where he'd gone. Giving up would mean Wen Chao won.

Lan SiZhui opened his eyes and applied a new talisman. The tendril-like resentful energy jerked back from him. Lan SiZhui swallowed down bile rising in his throat and took a step forward. Another. And he kept going, as long as he could.

To occupy his mind, Lan SiZhui imagined the war fought here. He imagined Xue ChongHai, hiding out in his cave, his high castle, looking down at the battlefield and controlling unimaginable beasts to kill the five great Sects' warriors. Lan SiZhui imagined the brave men who fought here, who gave their lives to defeat the tyrant. He imagined five heroes, one from each Sect, being selected to march up the mountain to Xue ChongHai's residence and kill the monster himself.

He imagined himself walking the same path they'd walked. He imagined; the Lan Sect's hero was the first to stay behind and fight off monsters who were winning over some poor soldiers. He imagined the Jiang Sect's hero went ahead and engaged in a fight with a great beast. Seeing that, the Nie Sect's hero would join him, help defeat the beast – in Lan SiZhui's mind, it was a great tortoise, like Xuanwu. The Jin and Wen Sect's heroes would exchange a look and nod to each other. They would be the ones to deliver the fatal blow to the culprit. They would march up to the entrance of the cave, but they would find several corpses defending it – a whole army of its own.



By then, Lan SiZhui imagined, tired, aching and sickly, that the warriors around the mountain would've been done with their own battles and joined them up there. A deathly battle would've been fought there, for the amount of resentful energy that was present in front of the cave. The Jin hero would've held the attackers off with their own army and urged the Wen hero to go and kill Xue ChongHai.

Before Lan SiZhui reached the final battle in his own imagination, he tripped over something. He stumbled onto his hands and knees. His broken arm hurt awfully as he attempted to put pressure on it, but he ignored it as he looked down, just to see some kind of pattern underneath his hands. With how foggy his mind was from his injuries and from his daydream, it took him a minute to realize what he was seeing.

The magic circle! He reached the cave without noticing, and his feet caught in the edge of the groove that made up the outer circle of the array. Lan SiZhui looked up and around him. His vision was swimming and he felt faint. Still, he was so close to his destination. The resentful energy swirling around blocked his vision, but he still pushed himself on his feet and stumbling, he dragged himself over to the tunnels, where resentful energy was sparser.

He felt around with his hands. The world was spinning and out of focus. He followed the wall to the bedchamber, where resentful energy was the thinnest, almost non-existent. He couldn't even feel great relief, for he had to stop to throw up before he aimed for the bed at the far wall, made his sluggish way over, collapsed on top and passed out.

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When Lan SiZhui woke next, he felt thick-headed and feverish. He could hardly open his eyes and once he did, all he could do was to stare at the ceiling of the cave blankly. It took him what felt like long minutes to raise his good arm and feel his cheeks and forehead for fever. He found them perfectly fine temperature, but he seldom was feverish. He didn't know what to feel for. He was hungry, he noted, his stomach feeling cold and empty. For he had nothing to eat, he curled up on his side and couldn't keep his eyes open anymore.

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He didn't know how much time had passed. He woke feeling less thick-headed and feverish than before. After that first time, he woke a few more times, but all he could do was to register he was hungry and thirsty before sleep claimed him again.

This time, he felt slightly better. Not well, but clear-headed. He still lacked energy and he was still hungry and thirsty. One-armed, he pushed himself up to sit. He looked around, the memories from when he entered the cave hazy and blurry.

The bedchamber looked the same as it had before, when him and his friends had visited the Burial Mounds. There were still jars and pots scattered around, some rags and many papers, books and notes as well. He supposed the best he could do would be to clean up and set out to find food and at least water. He doubted anything edible lived on the mountain.

He also had to make a plan. He didn't know how long he'd been in the Burial Mounds. Last time Wen ZhuLiu hit him he lost consciousness for a few hours, but this time it felt more

powerful. His Core was all but drained, and the last time that happened, here in the Burial Mounds, he was in a coma for five days. And now, he was injured as well. He could have slept through the whole week and wouldn't know. It was not a fond thought.

Lan SiZhui sat on the bed and closed his eyes. His Golden Core felt faint. It was so weak, he wasn't sure he could claim to have healed at all. For now, he let it be, not wanting to delay the process. At least, this told him he didn't spend much time here. Either that's why he was still lacking spiritual energy or his Golden Core attempted to heal him while he was unconscious and drained itself again. Next, he took out his qiankun bag and emptied it, to see what he had on him. Not much, he suspected.

He had Hudie, a few general talismans cultivators always kept on themselves. He also had some Graveyard-Purging talismans, seventeen, to be exact. He also had some blank talisman papers, a brush, a block of ink. Thankfully, he had a bit of bread as well, though he wasn't sure when that had found its way into his bag. He also had some tea leaves and some herbs, which he quickly checked and found some he could use for healing.

He got up and cleaned up the best he could. There was a high table pushed against one of the walls, but no chairs, which meant he'd have to stand to look at it. He piled the papers on top of that. Next, he picked up a pot and a jar and applying another talisman, headed outside. He put them somewhere he was sure he'd find them later, and left them there to hopefully collect rainwater. Since he was already outside, he decided to look around a bit.

He shallowly remembered the layout of this area from when he was very young and from last years' events. There was not much to see, but he thought it helped to orient him a little. Once the talisman began burning again, he returned to the cave. He ate, read through some of the papers he'd found in the cave, then his head started to hurt and he decided to rest some.

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Three days after that went in a similar fashion. It was hard to decide when was day and when was night. The hours blurred together and Lan SiZhui could only hope he didn't spend too much time sitting around. On the third day, he finally noticed some progress. His Golden Core felt faintly well. It wasn't near healed, but he could perform smaller spells, probably. Not enough to call Feixu to him, nor to feed a Graveyard-Purging talisman for long enough to find it, but it would be able to help him find the spiritual sword, help him detect the spirit within.

That first day he landed, he didn't think much about the fierce corpses not attacking him. He was too tired, too sore, too disoriented to think of that. Now that he had more time to think, he wondered. He set off to find Feixu, his spiritual power, as weak as it was, guiding him towards the sword, when a hand grabbed his ankle. Lan SiZhui cried out in alarm, jerking away from the touch. The hand had a tight hold on him, and because of it, he couldn't step away and ended up tripping backwards, falling on his backside with a painful hiss. That's when he saw the face and the gaping mouth.

He tried to pry the hand off him, but by then, his talisman started burning and with it, it also burned the resentful soul out of the corpse. He quickly applied a new talisman and shook off the hand. So, whatever came over the fierce corpses on that first day had passed, now they

had attacked. He was torn. On one hand, he needed to get Feixu to get out, to reach Wen Ning, but without his spiritual power, he didn't have any chance getting through the corpses. He didn't have enough talismans to go around like this.

With one last, longing look, he glanced where he sensed Feixu from, then stood and went back to the cave. He supposed that was the smart thing to do, to wait for his spiritual powers to return enough that he wouldn't get mauled by fierce corpses nor resentful energy, but this still left a sour taste in his mouth.

He felt shameful, like he failed an important mission, abandoning Wen Ning like this, even though he knew there was nothing to be done. He had to wait, otherwise he'd just end up injuring himself further or get himself killed. That wouldn't help anyone. His cousin could survive for as long as it took him to restore his Golden Core. Wen Ning was strong. If he didn't survive... Lan SiZhui didn't even want to think about it.

So, he kept doing what he'd been doing so far. He meditated, checked the pots and jars by the entrance for rainwater. Sometimes, he thought when it was early morning, there was some water in them, but it dried out quickly, so he had to drink it quick. He portioned his piece of bread to last him a few days, though it wouldn't last for long, he'd survive with inedia once his powers restored.

He also read the texts. Xue ChongHai didn't really leave detailed theories of the usage of resentful energy, manuals and journals like the YiLing Patriarch had. These texts also suggested their author didn't understand the use deeply either. He also mostly wrote about his experiments. How high a being's spiritual levels were, and how could they be used. How many sacrifices it took to feed the Yin Iron, to maintain it.

Lan SiZhui didn't like reading these texts, but he disliked doing nothing even more. Every time he stopped, he was reminded of Wen Ning, somewhere out there, being tortured by Wen Chao, simply because he followed Lan SiZhui around. That was unfair. Lan SiZhui felt anger towards Wen Chao. He often found the other's actions distasteful, dishonorable and mindless, he thought Wen Chao wouldn't sweep so low.

It was frustrating, a feeling Lan SiZhui wasn't overly familiar with. He knew what had to be done and how to do it, but he didn't have the energy to do so. His theory about restoring his Golden Core by sheer will alone he had before falling seemed foolish now. Even if he managed to do so, his injuries would claim priority and not finding Feixu and flying out.

He never even flew with Feixu before, the bitter thought emerged in his mind as he settled on the stone bed to meditate.



The days had gone by and the longer it took for his Golden Core to return to normal, the more frustrated Lan SiZhui felt. Logically, he knew he had no way of hurrying the progress, that even if he did, his injuries would needed to be healed first, at least some more serious ones. He threw up a couple times since that first day, and his head was constantly hurting and swimming. His arm also needed to be fixed. Lan SiZhui checked it once or twice, every time

the ugly, purplish swelling greeting him in mocking. He thought, even if his leg had been fixed before, there was no Wen Qing, nor Su healers, nor Lan healers to fix his arm now.

Every day he attempted to go out and look for Feixu, but it was in vain. The fierce corpses surrounded the area, no matter what direction he attempted to leave. He was caged in, without much spiritual power, which was slow to return. He longed for Wen Qing's tincture he got when they arrived to the supervisory office.

Every day he meditated for hours and tried to ignore his aches and his growing anxiety. He left himself in denial until he felt too much time had passed. One day, he woke to the feeling that more than a week had passed since he woke from his fever. He laid in the hard bed, staring, unseeing at the ceiling and felt tears gathering in his eyes.

Wen Ning was probably dead by now. Again. And this time around, there was no Wei WuXian to bring him back. There was no Wei WuXian to restore his soul. No one to save him. Lan SiZhui was supposed to save him, but he failed the young boy. Wen Ning died thinking Lan SiZhui would come back and fight Wen Chao and pick Wen Ning up and run back to his sister, who would be in tears from relief.

Lan SiZhui let himself cry. He mourned his friend and uncle, mourned the young man he could've become if Lan SiZhui didn't fail him. He needn't to die this time around. He could've lived. He could've become a master archer, compete with a reluctant Jin Ling. He could've grew old and stayed the cheerful, shy person he was. But Lan SiZhui failed him.

Lan SiZhui wondered how would he ever look at Wen Qing again. They didn't have what one could call a good relationship, but Lan SiZhui got used to it. Him and Jin Ling had a similar relationship in the beginning. Jin Ling claimed he disliked him, then once they were in the past, he voiced how Lan SiZhui was his friend. Jiang Cheng was also similar. He didn't show he liked someone until they spent enough time together that eventually, someone claimed he didn't like someone and he voiced how wrong they were loud enough for half of the city to hear him.

Maybe Wen Qing was the same, at least Lan SiZhui often thought about their relationship in that regard. He also liked the woman, even though he received more harsh words from her than not. He liked her confidence and kindness, even if she hid it under prickly layers. Surely, once she learned Lan SiZhui was the reason her brother was dead, nothing of that kindness would be directed at him again.

Not that he didn't know he wasn't the sole reason for the boy's death. He knew Wen Chao was the one to put Lan SiZhui in such situation and he was the one to kill Wen Ning – or maybe he ordered Wen ZhuLiu, Lan SiZhui couldn't be sure. But Lan SiZhui was the one to claim the Yin Iron was in the Burial Mounds until the last minute, just out of sheer arrogance. He thought he'd just fall, restore his Golden Core and come out like a hero rising from the belly of a monster that swallowed him. Lan SiZhui truly had too much confidence in his own powers.

He remembered an old phrase his adoptive father told him after a similar incident. Well, it was similar in that Lan SiZhui was overconfident and realized it too late. Hanguang-Jun then said, still dusty from their journey from Mo Manor to Cloud Recesses:

*“Mistakes had been made before you made them and will be made after you’re gone. Feeling guilty about it won’t make it right. Forgive yourself, learn from it and do better in the future.”*

He thought, for now, just a little bit, he will allow himself to feel guilty and wallow in self-pity. Then tomorrow, he will figure out how to make it right.



Frustration became a familiar feeling throughout the days Lan SiZhui spent in the Burial Mounds. He was mostly frustrated with himself, with his inability to restore his Golden Core quickly enough. He knew there was very little he could do about it. But he also noticed something troublesome.

His inability in and of itself could’ve been written off as a serious injury for the first week. By the time he figured two weeks had gone by, his Golden Core was still faint and struggling to restore itself, he had to think about different reasons.

Usually, if a cultivator was injured, their Golden Core would help the healing process a little. The cultivator would need to channel their qi to fully take advantage of the healing powers of their spiritual energies. One needed a peaceful location to do so, somewhere with strong positive energies. But unless the cultivator channeled their qi, it would not take the initiative and heal them by itself. So, his spiritual energy was not being drained by his injuries.

His Golden Core felt intact. Not tainted by resentful energy, nor damaged by Wen ZhuLiu’s attack. There was nothing blocking his qi from circulating in his body. There was no reason for his spiritual energy to be still drained after two weeks.

The only thing Lan SiZhui could think of was that his Golden Core was fighting off either some nasty infection in his body – which was possible, seeing he was still unsure of the extent of his injuries – or the strong negative energy in the Burial Mounds blocked his positive energies. Even though he spent most of his time in the bedchambers, where resentful energy did not reach, there was still some present here. His spiritual energy was too occupied trying to keep the resentful energy from damaging him, that his Golden Core could not properly restore.

Unfortunately, there was very little Lan SiZhui could do about that. He was in the least resentful area of the Burial Mounds, and it wasn’t like he could escape somewhere without any resentful energy to recover. He could hardly go past the entrance of the cave. He was, in all sense of the word, trapped.

This left him with very few options. One of them was to ward off the bedchambers completely. They haven’t tested the Graveyard-Purging talisman as a ward yet, but there was one built into it. It was made of the combination of an evil-suppressing talisman and a purging ward. The issue was, every ward was as powerful as the caster. Even if Lan SiZhui hung Graveyard-Purging talismans around the room, he’d need at least some spiritual energy to activate them. When he applied the talisman on his person, his body’s natural spiritual energies would feed it without him needing to actively feeding any into it. But the cold stone of the chamber’s walls did not have natural spiritual energy in them.

His other option was not something he thought about fondly. All his life every teacher and every one of his peers had expressed their opinion about this loudly. Some thought even the existence of it was a sin of humanity. Many thought the practitioners were all evil and needed to be killed without questioning. Lan SiZhui himself did not think of it fondly either. Nor only did Hanguang-Jun caution him against this vehemently, he'd seen first-hand what it did to the practitioner. The grandmaster of it himself was the perfect example why one shouldn't use demonic cultivation.

Lan SiZhui, while he understood the theory of it, never thought about the actual usage. Everyone who'd used it before had a tool to channel it, to control it with. The Yin Iron. Lan SiZhui, despite what he told Wen Chao, did not have a shard nor in his possession, nor the knowledge of one's location.

He sat on the bed, Xue ChongHai's texts in front of him, his ink and brush next to some blank papers Xue ChongHai left laying around. He documented what he knew of demonic cultivation first, just to have physical reference points about it. He started with the obvious:

Resentful energy is energy, just like spiritual energy is energy. Cultivators channel spiritual energy through their Golden Cores, they use spells and tools to express it. Demonic cultivators channel resentful energy through the Yin Iron, a natural artifact tainted with a great amount of resentful energy – almost like an external, resentful Core. One needed that tool in order to use resentful energy, otherwise it infected both body and mind and most likely resulted in killing the demonic cultivator.

In conclusion, he needed something similar to the Yin Iron in order to use resentful energy himself. Even resentful energy was only energy, and an object could only yield energy if it was either made to accommodate it – like a spiritual sword, guqin or other spiritual tools, like Jin Ling's bow. If an object was not made to accommodate energy, it could only used to channel it by it having natural spiritual affiliation. Such were organic matters that had not been altered by any human touch.

Unfortunately for Lan SiZhui, there were only so many things he had on him that were of such matters. He had Hudie, but the guqin was too pure to be used in such way. He could maybe use talismans, but they were weak and disposable. The only thing left was his own body, and he wasn't about to use it to channel resentful energy. It would not only drive him mad, but most likely tear him apart as well.

He either had to find something else, or another method to use resentful energy at all. He thought until fatigue took him and he had to rest. This was the only thing in his mind for the next two days. He even tried out his talisman theory, but it turned out resentful energy was too much for a piece of paper and the talisman burned before Lan SiZhui could do anything.

He thought about traditional cultivation methods and how they could be used to channel spiritual energy. Sword practice could certainly work, but he needed to control resentful energy to get to his sword in the first place. Talismans, flags, arrays, compasses... Neither seemed plausible.

It was the third day of him trying to come up with a solution when he remembered a conversation he had so long ago with ZeWu-Jun. At the time, him and his friends had just

arrived to the past. They actually just figured it out right after the introduction ceremony.

He remembered faintly that he'd asked ZeWu-Jun about what he would do if he were to go back in time and had the opportunity to change the course of events. He also remembered that back then, as an afterthought, he asked ZeWu-Jun about other uses of Qin language.

His theory at the time had been that *Spring Again* brought them to the past. It was an earlier version of *Inquiry* and clearly more powerful than the current version of it, for it brought them back to the past and also brought Jin Ling to his own Sect where they'd stayed in a bordering town while they were on their way to the Lan guest lectures. At the time, he figured if the earlier version of *Summoning* was so powerful, then the same method could be used to bring them back to their own time.

In a way, he was probably right, but he'd stopped looking for ways to get back when they'd decided to change the past. At the time, he didn't think much about those implications, but now he thought about it.

If *Inquiry* could be used to bring three people to the past, could it also be used for other things? The Lan musical cultivation was strong, but it was mostly superficial. One could communicate with ghosts and cleanse souls, or cage them with this method. Who said it couldn't be used to actually control them?

Of course, this thought was uncomfortable, for one should never control ghosts. It was not honorable to use such methods. But then he thought about Su She's way of cutting off the cultivators' qi when they were lured into the Burial Mounds, and thought about Jin GuangYao using *Clarity* to stir resentful energy in Nie MingJue. While it was unethical and a dark act to do so, maybe this was the answer he was looking for.

Musical cultivation and Qin language didn't use resentful energy, but could be used to suppress it and cleanse it. Su She and Jin GuangYao both proved it could also be used to summon it and control it. By that logic, Lan SiZhui could also use it to control the resentful energy in the Burial Mounds.

He sat on the stone bed, Hudie in his lap and closed his eyes, concentrating on the notes he willed to play. He faintly remembered the old notes of *Song of Winter* and *Spring Again*, also of Su She's qi-blocking spell. They were of the same fashion, so surely, they all came from the older, earlier version of Qin language.

Lan SiZhui's strongest cultivation method was Qin language. He knew it by heart at this point and he had no problem inventing new phrases using the notes he knew. But this refined language he used, he knew it was too weak to actually control resentful energy. He had to translate his verses to the old Qin language. While he had little knowledge of that version, it was also the origin of Qin language. If he could trace back what modern notes translated to those old ones he also knew, he surely could figure out more and more phrases and actually discover what the old language sounded like.

Lan SiZhui, excited, even though his arm ached as he moved it, started playing.

♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪

Lan SiZhui's plan wasn't the best. This, he knew, and had no illusions about it. There was a very small chance that Wen Ning was still alive. He was probably dead before the week Wen Chao had given Lan SiZhui was even up. If that was the case, then Lan SiZhui had every right to demand revenge. That, he did not feel badly about.

But he would have to do it all alone. While he had no intention to use his new techniques after he was free of the Burial Mounds, Jin Ling would surely ask how he got out, and he'd have to either lie or tell the truth. With Jin Ling, neither were a good choice.

Jin Ling wasn't an unreasonable person. Wen Ning killed his father, for that, he hated him. Wei WuXian was the reason his mother went to Nightless City, and for that, she died. Jin Ling hated Wei WuXian for this. However, for the world or his uncles taught him this, Lan SiZhui didn't know, but Jin Ling also believed that every demonic cultivator was inherently evil and there was very little reason to befriend one.

Because what was Lan SiZhui now, if not a demonic cultivator? He contemplated as he plucked the strings of his guqin and the dark fog of resentful energy parted for him, granting him free access to the mountain path. He took a deep breath, this method still new to him, despite him practicing for weeks. His arm had healed somewhat, but it was still sore. His ribs also ached constantly, and he just recovered from a common cold.

Lan SiZhui did not count the days for there was very little measurements he could use. There was constantly dark in the caves, and he had slept so frequently nowadays, he didn't think his normal inner time sensation was working anymore. He suspected, just by sheer guessing, he had been to the Burial Mounds for a little over a month now. He was, frankly, done with being here.

He had practiced the controlling nature of the old Qin language for a long time. He would sit in the tunnel leading to the bedchambers, looking out into the main chamber of Demon-Subdue Cave and he would play different combinations to see how the resentful energy reacted. Sometimes he got the notes right, and that time, he recorded these onto a piece of paper. Towards the end, he'd been writing over Xue ChongHai's notes, for he was short of available space on the once empty papers. Sometimes, he got the notes wrong, and two things would happen: the resentful energy just didn't do what he asked it, or, more frequently, it would attack him. Then, Lan SiZhui would need to sleep for a few days to recover before he could restart.

It was a miserable life he'd lived in the past month and a half. He had discovered a pool of water in the Demon-Subdue Cave, but after he first drank from it, he had to realize it made him sick. Then, he had to find a way to boil it to get rid of whatever made him sick, which meant he ran out of talismans way too soon. The pots that he'd placed in front of the entrance to collect rainwater filled with alarming slowness, and most of the time, all he caught had been just morning dew, which he had to lick off the side of the bowl. Food was also sparse, and Lan SiZhui had eaten things he got sick over most often than what he could keep down. He did not know how Wei WuXian survived it here before him.

Lan SiZhui forced himself to stop thinking about how awful it was to be in the Burial Mounds and concentrated on his task again. If he succeeded, he'd not have to tear up the bark of trees for worms, nor set up traps for lizards in the caves anymore. He played another note



and with a minor surprise, he watched as the resentful energy surged forward, ahead of him, obeying him and leading him.

He walked slowly, keeping out of the ink-like fog as the rolling, tendril-like smoke led him up a slope, deeper into the cursed place. Lan SiZhui followed the resentful energy that he ordered to lead him to his sword, stopping every once a while to play another note, to remind the energy to do his bidding, to ward it off his person and sometimes just to take a break. Lan SiZhui tired much faster nowadays. Sometimes, when he was doing intense work, he found himself having to stop after an hour and sleep for two. This, of all his injuries, worried him the most. If he wanted to get revenge, he had to be in better shape. He hoped, once he was properly out of the clutches of resentful energy, he would start healing better.

It took him almost three hours of hiking, carrying the heavy guqin, without a way to sit and take a proper rest somewhere. He had to watch out for fierce corpses, who moved in the resentful energy like they were swimming in it, and all this anxiety and extortion was wearing him out. He had to admit, when he'd stopped to rest for the second time in thirty minutes, that his initial plan to get Feixu and fly out would not work. He'd need to go back to the Demon-Subdue Cave, rest, and only then could he leave.

Annoyed, tired and sore, Lan SiZhui played some notes to urge the resentful energy onward. It did, for a few feet, then it stopped, surging around a spot on the ground. Lan SiZhui narrowed his eyes and played another command, this time ordering the rolling fog to clear off.

Feixu was dirty and half-buried in the hard soil. Lan SiZhui almost cried in joy at the sight of the Wen sword, and he reached down, taking hold of the scabbard, then pulled, only to be stopped by a force holding the sword back.

Lan SiZhui tugged again, but Feixu did not budge. Then, Lan SiZhui felt the earth move underneath him, and he let out a cry of alarm, stepping back. As he moved away, he watched as the soil fell away from the spot he'd just been standing at, and something plated rose. For a moment, Lan SiZhui thought it was the Tortoise of Slaughter and he scrambled backwards, his heel catching in a root and he fell back, Hudie hitting him in the chest as he pulled it with him.

It wasn't Xuanwu, but the plates of an armor. A fierce corpse was wearing it, skin grey and wrinkled, shaped like it was matted to the bones themselves. Lan SiZhui figured that was a likely case. It was ancient. Lan SiZhui had only been practicing with resentful energy for a few short weeks, but even he could tell that the energy clinging to this corpse was older than any other he'd encountered before. It was also holding Feixu.

Lan SiZhui frowned, and played a few notes, trying to placate the corpse, but it just looked at him with dark eyes, staring at him from the depths of the soldier's helmet. It had its own sword, at least once it had. Now the scabbard was hanging empty on his side, wider and flatter than the ones Lan SiZhui was used to, and it was bent – no, not bent. It was shaped to curve like that, and Lan SiZhui wondered what kind of land this person came from when he was still alive.

He did not have much time to ponder, for the soldier raised his arm, with Feixu still in it, sheathed and held at the middle as it was, the corpse brought it down with such force, as Lan SiZhui rolled away, he saw the hilt sink completely into the ground. He gulped, looking over at the soldier once more. What was he to do if he couldn't control the corpse's energy?

As the soldier charged once more, Lan SiZhui dodged and thought hard. He wasn't Wei WuXian, he did not have a piece of Yin Iron. With one, maybe he could control such an old creature, but as it was, his control over the resentful energy wasn't endless, and it was clumsy at best. So, what else would Wei WuXian do? What would the YiLing Patriarch do?

As Lan SiZhui dodged the fifth attack, it suddenly came to him. But Wei WuXian didn't only control resentful energy. At least not only what one could see. Lan SiZhui only controlled fierce corpses so much as to send them away, but could he call them to battle?

He didn't hesitate much as a strike got him across the back and he fell, face-down into the dirt. He was quick to get back onto his feet, then he positioned Hudie and played.

Lan SiZhui never intended to use demonic energy against anything, he just wanted to get free of the Burial Mounds. But, as he watched as five fierce corpses that had been roaming around in his proximity attacked the soldier, he wondered. What if he could actually replace Wei WuXian in history and defeat Wen RuoHan himself?

Jin Ling would not like it. He would most likely oppose to it loudly, and even though Lan JingYi was not quick to judge, he would dislike the idea greatly as well. But, as Lan SiZhui played, he could see it happening. He could control the resentful energy just as well as Wei WuXian could. Maybe not to the same extent, for he did not have a shard of Yin Iron, and even if he did, his method was different, but in efficiency, it was a near thing. At least, he thought it was as he watched the fierce corpses tear the soldier to pieces, carrying them off somewhere, leaving only the armor and Feixu lying in the dirt.

Lan SiZhui panted as he looked around. Resentful energy hovered close to him, and he played a few notes to keep it away, then headed for the sword. Finally. He bent and picked it up, eyes dry and stringing from the dust the fight stirred up, but his heart felt much lighter with Feixu in his hand. Even if he never used it again, he could keep his promise to Wen Qing.

He looked around, but he knew there was no way he could fly to the barrier now. His eyes were already drooping and the only place he could rest peacefully was the Demon-Subdue Cave. Lan SiZhui unsheathed Feixu, the Wen sword a bit worse for wear, but intact. He lined it up and willed to fly, at least back to the cave.

That's when the realization came, as he watched Feixu, dormant and empty in his hand, similar to when he'd first held it in his hand in the Xuanwu cave. Of course, even if he wasn't tired, he could not use it to fly out. He had virtually no spiritual energy, just enough to let him know his Golden Core was fine.

Disappointment and anger mixed with desperation and the strongest desire to leave, Lan SiZhui's sight blurred as tears gathered in them. He refused to cry, but just barely so, willing himself to think about this in a different light. Maybe he wasn't able to leave just yet, but he

had Feixu. He could go back to the cave and figure out a way to either purify some ground to let himself heal enough to fly, or he could figure out a way to disable the barrier, now that he could control resentful energy effectively.

With that thought in his mind, he turned back and played a few notes, ordering the resentful energy to lead him back to the cave now. He secured Feixu to his belt and started ahead.

## Mortality III.

The plan was as follows: get out of the Burial Mounds, find Wen Chao as soon as possible and if he found Wen Ning, free him, if he was dead, take revenge. It wasn't a complicated plan, nor a defined one Lan SiZhui would normally come up with, but the truth was, he was much too tired to figure out a proper one at this time.

He was preoccupied the days following him finding Feixu. While the sword gave him some comfort, there was very little use to it now, that Lan SiZhui's spiritual energy was damaged. He still wasn't sure why that was the case. He refused to worry about it much until he got away from the negative energies of the Burial Mounds – if he was still struggling to restore his Golden Core once he was outside, he would need to worry.

He spent his time working on a talisman instead. Thanks to their earlier studies on wards, Lan SiZhui was at least somewhat familiar with what could've been put up around the Burial Mounds to trap the resentful energy inside. This had to be the same craft Madam Lan used on Cold Pond Cave. The only issue was, as that ward, this one was far too powerful as well. But unlike Lan Yi's ward, Lan SiZhui had a suspicion about how to disable it.

From what he knew of wards, the caster had to be alive to feed spiritual energy into it for the ward to stay intact. The issue was, nobody was around for as long as the Burial Mounds had been warded off. This led Lan SiZhui to believe there was either a similar trick in the background as there had been in Cold Pond Cave, therefore someone was alive and inside the Burial Mounds, keeping up the wards.

This was very highly unlikely. For one, as far as Lan SiZhui knew, the Demon-Subdue Cave was the only place where a human could safely survive. Even if there was another place, the person who kept the ward up had to have incredibly strong cultivation and so resentful energy would not be as it was inside if there was such a person inside its confines.

The other option that Lan SiZhui found the most likely, was that there was a sacrifice made here once. A cultivator, perhaps a strong one, was left behind to cast and keep up the ward. It wasn't impossible, though hard to imagine, that after the cultivator died, their resentful energy remained in the Burial Mounds, feeding this ward. Lan SiZhui could also imagine that this array had been set up in a fashion that allowed any resentful energy to feed it. Therefore, the Burial Mounds were warded off against the outside by its own inner energies.

Lan SiZhui's theory was the following: if he could force the resentful energy to stop feeding into the ward, the barrier would disable. The issue was this: if he took down the barrier by subduing the resentful energy, how would he put it back up so that when he left, the ward would remain active? Someone would need to recast it, and he heard it took hundreds of cultivators to set this one up. Even if Lan SiZhui would be able, he'd end up having to stay here until resentful energy took over once again – a meaningless course of action.

Therefore, Lan SiZhui worked on a talisman. He intended the talisman to work as the cast of the ward, and once he left, it would recast it. The issue was that to activate it remotely, he

would need his spiritual energy, and all of it. He'd almost come up with the talisman when this thought occurred to him, and so, he was left without a solution once again.



It took him almost two weeks to come up with a new theory. He would not disable the ward completely. He would weaken it enough that he would be able to breach it using a technique he'd learned from Senior Wei: he would send out a charm that resonated with the ward's energy, making it believe Lan SiZhui had the same energy as the barrier had, and let him through. For this, he needed two things. He needed to subdue the resentful energy enough to weaken but not break the barrier, and he needed some spiritual energy to cast the charm.

The former would not pose an issue – Lan SiZhui at this point had been controlling resentful energy for almost a month. The latter would be more troublesome, seeing how he still lacked spiritual energy. And so, Lan SiZhui came up with another theory and he spent hours daily by the barrier, feeling out its energies, trying to draw up a talisman that resonated with it.



It was a week later he'd finally found the right resonance, and he had to force himself not to hope in freedom, for he could easily fail in this and end up dead anyway. But if he could try it, he would, and so, Lan SiZhui one day collected everything he wished to take with him, his music notes with the demonic musical cultivation folded inside his clothes, he descended the mountain.

He sat down in front of the barrier as he had done several times in the past week before. This time, Hudie wasn't in his lap to just ward off the resentful energy from attacking him. This time, he brought his guqin to subdue it. He took a deep breath, his heartbeat loud in his ears, blocking out the scream-like wind he got alarmingly used to. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

The first note left his guqin clean and loud, an order. Resentful energy swirled around him, enclosing him and dancing to his song, bending to his will. He didn't rush, even though he was giddy with the thought of freedom just steps away from him. He *felt* the resentful energy respond to him, obey his order, listen to him and do his bidding.

This feeling was intoxicating, and for a moment, Lan SiZhui had a terrifying thought: so this is why Senior Wei was so reluctant to part from demonic cultivation. He shook away that thought, even though he acknowledged, deep in his heart, that this was one of the most peculiar feelings he ever had. All his life people said resentful energy could not be controlled, was only good to harm and should never be even thought about using it. Yet, Lan SiZhui, model disciple of the GusuLan sat in the Burial Mounds and ordered about a hundred thousand acres worth of resentful energy.

The song thrummed with confidence as Lan SiZhui played to the spirits. He willed them to listen to him and obey his orders, and soon, he felt it, how the violent energy around him shimmered down, subdued and calmed. He did not want to push it too hard, did not want to repress all the resentful energy, because once he left, it would just reform, but the ward would not. Lan SiZhui then stood, ceasing his commands and applied the talisman on himself,

approaching the barrier. He reached out, expecting that his hand would meet an unseen resistance like it had so many times in the past week.

His hand passed through the air, only a faint buzz on his skin reminding him there was once a barrier in the first place. He hesitated for only a moment, his resolve returning as he thought of Wen Ning, tied up in a cold and damp cell somewhere, to Wen Chao's mercy, and he stepped through the barrier.

It was truly like a fresh breath of air, and the pressure he hadn't even noticed to have been weighting him down, gone. To be free of resentful energy and of the burden of the Burial Mounds was like shaking off his chains. His ribs still ached and his arm was still sore, but it didn't matter, because finally, he was free. He was out and finally, he could restore his Golden Core and return home to the Cloud Recesses.

Only after he was done with Wen Chao, a small part of him reminded him, but he was too preoccupied with the relief of escaping. He could worry about Wen Chao after he'd had a bath, a proper meal and some time to heal.

He couldn't even comprehend how overwhelmed he became from all these thoughts. There was so much to do. So little time. While Lan SiZhui wanted nothing more than to take a proper rest, gain back his energy, eat, drink and sleep, he knew that the longer he lingered, the longer Wen Ning was in the enemy's clutches.

He looked back behind himself, seeing the resentful energy stirring again, thickening and swirling against the barrier, as if it was trying to get to Lan SiZhui, like a lost pup whose human was behind a door and it tried to get back to them. He swallowed, contemplating to play some relaxing notes before he realized the resentful energy was not his pet. He shook his head at his foolishness, disgusted with himself.

"Lan SiZhui?" He heard the quiet voice unexpectedly from the side and involuntarily he spun, playing some notes on instinct. But nothing happened, for the person stepping out from behind the trees was not a fierce corpse that needed to be subdued, but a human, with dark, purple robes and red underneath, his face familiar and kind, one Lan SiZhui thought of most when he was in the Burial Mounds.

"Xian-ge..." Lan SiZhui murmured and Wei WuXian furrowed his brows, looking at him critically. Lan SiZhui looked back, blinking with wide eyes before he realized he'd called Wei WuXian how he used to call him when he was young and his face heated with embarrassment. "Young Master Wei." Belatedly, Lan SiZhui realized he still had Hudie in front of him and he quickly put it away. He then bowed to Wei WuXian, though not as long and deep as it would be custom, but he blamed his surprise at seeing the other man so unexpectedly for his bad manners.

"Is this really you?" Wei WuXian blinked at him with the same surprise, so surely, he wasn't expecting to find Lan SiZhui here either.

"Yes." He looked over Wei WuXian. The other didn't look bad. Not at all. He looked like he'd been well taken-care of, unlike how Lan SiZhui remembered him from the old days when they still lived together. This filled him with some relief, knowing that him and Jin

Ling could at least change this much about the past. “Young Master Wei, what are you doing here?”

“You’re asking me?” Wei WuXian’s eyes narrowed and he glanced behind Lan SiZhui, where the barrier leading to the Burial Mounds was closed once again, resentful energy swirling past it. “Lan SiZhui, what are you doing here? And where have you been in the past three months? Jin Ling worried himself sick and yelled himself hoarse. We started looking for you as soon as we could, but we couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“Jin Ling is here?” Lan SiZhui asked, quickly looking around them, hoping he hadn’t seen Lan SiZhui use demonic cultivation just minutes ago. It wasn’t like Lan SiZhui intended to lie to him, but there was a better time and place for his friend to find out.

“Not here, but close. We’re staying at the local inn. He’ll be relieved that I’ve found you.” Wei WuXian smiled at Lan SiZhui, who tightly returned it. “Let’s go. I’m sure you’re both desperate to reunite.” He grinned, but Lan SiZhui hesitated, licking his dry lips.

While he truly wanted to see his friends and make sure they were alright and reunite, before this, he was ready to hunt down Wen Chao. It wasn’t that he didn’t think Jin Ling wouldn’t be a partner in his plans, but he didn’t intend to hold back. At the moment, with his Golden Core so weak, his most dangerous weapon was the songs he played on Hudie and Jin Ling was not fond of demonic cultivation. If he could delay this meeting a little bit, Lan SiZhui was willing to risk this. That was, until Wei WuXian somehow found him, and he had no sound reason why he shouldn’t be eager to meet Jin Ling.

This thought made him pause and he looked up. “Young Master Wei, how did you find me?” Wei WuXian’s eyebrows jumped together in a frown for a moment at Lan SiZhui’s tone, then shrugged.

“I’m not sure.” But even as he said it, his hand went to the lapel of his robes, as if there was something there that would answer this question. Lan SiZhui frowned. “I just woke up and had this feeling.”

“Feeling?” Lan SiZhui asked back.

“Ah, it’s just... I felt like I needed to come here. Like something was calling for me.” His hand slid inside his robes, and Lan SiZhui watched as he pulled out a qiankun bag halfway and stroked it as if wanting to open it. Then he pushed it back where it was, then shook his head, clearing it from thoughts. “Ah, anyhow. You look...” He trailed off, frowning at Lan SiZhui. “Well, you look like you could use a bath and something to eat.”

“Water, perhaps, if you have any?” Lan SiZhui asked hopefully, and Wei WuXian’s expression was surprised, but he nodded, pulling off a waterskin from his belt. Lan SiZhui took it eagerly, leaning back his head to drink that much faster.

“Hey, hey, slow down.” Wei WuXian chuckled and a hand closed around Lan SiZhui’s wrist. He jerked away from the restraint, throwing the waterskin to the side and calling forth Hudie, his fingers positioned to play a certain tune. It happened within a few seconds and they both

froze, Wei WuXian glaring at him, wide-eyed with his hand still raised. Lan SiZhui looked back, then forced his fingers to relax and release the strings.

“Sorry.” He said quietly. Wei WuXian frowned, taking a step back, then looking to the side where the waterskin was lying on the ground. Lan SiZhui put Hudie away and leaned down to pick it up, offering it back to Wei WuXian.

“Ah, drink it. Just take it slow or you’ll get sick.” He said with his forehead wrinkled. Lan SiZhui didn’t meet his eyes as he obeyed. Once the waterskin was significantly lighter and Lan SiZhui truly felt sick, but amazing at the same time, thanks to the fresh water, he hesitated, unsure what to say.

“Thank you.” He settled on that and Wei WuXian smiled at him tightly.

“Come on. You can have a bath and a meal in the inn. Then you can tell us where you’ve been in the past months, alright?” Lan SiZhui hesitated again, and this time, Wei WuXian noticed, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion. “What’s the matter? Are you hurt?”

“Ah,” Lan SiZhui shook his head, his arm going around his middle where his ribs ached, “it’s not that...”

“You can tell me, Lan SiZhui.” Wei WuXian prompted.

“I know.” Lan SiZhui let himself smile widely, although Wei WuXian just looked even more concerned because of it, not being used to the gesture. He didn’t know that Lan SiZhui was sure if anyone, the YiLing Patriarch wouldn’t judge him for the usage of demonic cultivation. At the same time though, this wasn’t the YiLing Patriarch. It was Wei WuXian, who still had his Sect Leader and who hadn’t been thrown into the Burial Mounds and tainted by the resentful energy. Lan SiZhui sighed, feeling the fatigue coming on.

“Tell you what. If you don’t want to come back to the inn, there’s a stream not far from here. We camped there on the way to YiLing.” Lan SiZhui looked up, hopeful about the idea. Wei WuXian looked at him sadly, but then nodded encouragingly, and Lan SiZhui returned it.

They started walking, Lan SiZhui looking back one more time to make sure the resentful energy of the Burial Mounds was still contained in the barrier.

“Jiang Cheng is also here. Ah, Lan Zhan was going to come with us, but then he’d been called back to Gusu.” Wei WuXian said as they walked through the woods.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed to show he was paying attention.

“Ah, I should probably tell you what you’ve missed, yes? Or were you following the events while you were gone?” Wei WuXian asked, but it wasn’t a jab, but a genuine question. Lan SiZhui shook his head. Wei WuXian didn’t comment, but Lan SiZhui felt his gaze on himself. “Well, after I’ve sent you and Jin Ling to fetch your swords, back in Lotus Pier, Wen Chao’s mistress showed up. She wanted me whipped and have my hand cut off.” He shuddered and Lan SiZhui’s jaw clenched. He didn’t know that. “Madam Yu attacked her later, then she took us to the boats and tied us up, sending us to Meishan.



“Jin Ling told me during this, you two were trying to find Wen Chao’s forces, but were too late. He said you two joined the battle. Uncle Jiang said you two fought bravely, and it was thanks to the two of you they’ve survived.” Wei WuXian halted and Lan SiZhui frowned at him. Then the other boy bowed to Lan SiZhui. “Thank you for looking after my family, Lan SiZhui.”

“Ah, Young Master Wei, it’s unnecessary. We did what anyone would have done in that situation.”

“Maybe so, but not everyone would’ve sent thirty-five refugee juniors to their own home, risking to get attacked by the Wen again.” He told Lan SiZhui seriously.

“Thirty-five?” Lan SiZhui asked back, confused. He remembered pushing a smaller group of kids towards the boats, telling them to go to Gusu, but he was sure there were only ten or so people in that group. “Jin Ling must’ve had the same idea.” He thought out loud.

“Anyhow, the Jiang Sect is in your debt. Even if Madam Yu refuses to acknowledge the role you played.”

“It really wasn’t anything special.” Lan SiZhui insisted, feeling his face heat in embarrassment.

“Mn.” Wei WuXian shrugged, then they continued their way through the woods. They were quiet for a moment, then Wei WuXian picked up where he left off. “Me and Jiang Cheng and sister were trying to escape from Zidian. After we’ve already went far ahead, were we able to, so it took us a long time to go back. We returned by dawn, but by then, it was all over. Still, the Wen were looking for people everywhere, so we had no way to make sure if anyone survived. From the way the Wen took over Lotus Pier and Yunmeng, we feared the worst.

“We waited a few days to see if we catch any gossip. Then we heard Madam Yu and Sect Leader Jiang had escaped, so we decided to go to Meishan as they requested, hoping they would be there. Just a few days after we got there, did they turn up with Jin Ling. They told us what had happened. Jin Ling wanted to go back to YiLing to look for you, but Madam Yu forbid it and this time, Uncle Jiang agreed with her, telling him it would be too dangerous, and that you haven’t sent a message stating you were captured, so maybe you were just hiding until it was safe for you to come. Jin Ling was injured, so he couldn’t actually fight his way out of Meishan.

“The first few days he was sitting on the docks, looking out at the water and waiting for you. Then he thought maybe you’ve gone back to Gusu instead of Meishan, so you wouldn’t lead Wen Chao to us. He sent a letter, addressed to you, to the Cloud Recesses. After a few days he hadn’t gotten an answer and grew anxious. I was just visiting him on the docks when he stated he will go back to YiLing to look for you when Lan Zhan showed up.”

They’ve, by then, reached the stream Wei WuXian mentioned, but they didn’t stop. Wei WuXian led them downstream while he talked:

“He said he thought Jin Ling and you were together, so receiving a letter from him addressed to you concerned him. He figured you must’ve been separated. He heard about Lotus Pier and

he hoped to find you if he came where Jin Ling was hiding. But we were all he'd found." He paused, pursing his lips. "A lot of other things had happened. There was a lot of talk about a war, about joining forces with the other Sects. Lan Zhan had invited us all to the Cloud Recesses, and there we discussed the strategy with the available Sect Leaders.

"Jin Ling was anxious to find you, but nobody let him look for you. Not once he'd been caught trying to sneak out at night. Then we've decided to take back Lotus Pier in the same fashion the Cloud Recesses had been taken back. Uncle Jiang asked Jin Ling for his help, and he agreed, with the condition that if he were to help, then he could go and find you. Lan Zhan, Jiang Cheng and I said if we survived, we'd help him." He grinned.

"So, Lotus Pier is safe?" Lan SiZhui asked eagerly. In his own time, the battle to get Lotus Pier back was only possible once the participants of the Sunshot Campaign had already alternated some of the Wen's forces and their clutch on the Jiang Sect residence had slackened.

"It took us a whole day, but we've won." Wei WuXian grinned. "You should've been there. Jin Ling has this spiritual bow, watching him use it was peculiar. And Uncle Jiang said he was proud of Jiang Cheng and I."

"That is relieving to hear." Lan SiZhui nodded with a smile. They stopped and looked around.

"I think this is where we've camped the other day." Wei WuXian nodded towards a spot between the trees. "I'll get some firewood. Ah, should I bring some food from the town?" He looked over Lan SiZhui with a frown, who fingered Feixu's scabbard anxiously.

"Ah, I wouldn't want to trouble you..."

"It's no trouble." Wei WuXian nodded. "If I go, at least I can get Jin Ling—"

"Ah, Young Master Wei..." Lan SiZhui looked up, his brows furrowed. Wei WuXian looked back at him, confused, then something like understanding flashed in his eyes and he nodded.

"Mn, perhaps some food, a bath and some rest first." He said, sounding understanding. Lan SiZhui smiled tightly back at him. Wei WuXian nodded, then headed off towards the campsite. "Bathe as long as you like. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Thank you, Young Master Wei." Lan SiZhui told to his back, bowing. Soon, Wei WuXian was out of sight and Lan SiZhui sighed.

It was early morning, the light still dim and moody. It was freezing cold out here, though Lan SiZhui was used to it, his Golden Core was still not restored and he felt the temperature more than he liked. There was no snow, but Lan SiZhui was sure there was already some in the Cloud Recesses. He sighed at the thought, then shook it off. Just a little more, until he got Wen Ning back or revenge on Wen Chao, and he could return home.



As promised, Wei WuXian had returned soon. Lan SiZhui was already out of the stream, having washed his clothes as well, he was now sitting in front of the fire he made, holding up his red robes, drying them. His inner robes were still damp, but he figured it was better than sitting naked in the middle of the woods in the winter.

Wei WuXian announced his presence by obnoxious steps, twigs snapping and leaves crunching under his boots. He came with his hands full. He had a loaf of bread and some vegetables with him as well as dried meat. He had another bundle, some dark blue fabric under his arm.

“Here.” He put down the food on a rock and handed over the cloths. “I couldn’t find anything better this early, but these are warm, I think. I couldn’t find anything white.” He shrugged. Lan SiZhui put the Wen clothes aside and shook out the robes. They were, as he saw, a deep, dark blue. There were no underrobes, but his Wen inner robes were, unlike his outer layers that had suffered most in his time in the Burial Mounds, intact. He pulled it on, accepting the next layer, which he found familiar. He frowned, considering the outfit.

“Uh, Young Master Wei... Are these yours?”

“Ah, you figured out.” He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “No shop was open, so I went up to our room in the inn to pick these up.” Lan SiZhui’s brows furrowed and he opened his mouth to say something, but Wei WuXian waved a dismissive hand. “I told you, you needed some rest before you see the others. Don’t worry.” Lan SiZhui felt ashamed for not trusting Wei WuXian’s word, and for not wanting anyone else to know he’s back yet.

“Thank you.”

“Ah, one more thing.” He said, grinning, and Lan SiZhui eyed him questioningly. Wei WuXian reached back, and only now did Lan SiZhui notice a cloth-covered something on his back. Wei WuXian held it out for him, and Lan SiZhui took it, unwrapping it.

It was like receiving good news after a series of bad, it was better than being free of the Burial Mounds. Lan SiZhui watched, mouth agape, as the cloth fell away from a jade-carved hilt and guard, familiar cloud symbols decorating the elegant, if bulky sword. His eyes teared up as he uncovered the name of the sword, though he needn’t to, for the moment he touched it, he felt its familiar energy.

“Yingjiu.” He breathed and held the sword tightly. After he was done taking in the sight, he unsheathed it. Whoever kept it, they took good care of it. The blade was polished and slid out of the scabbard with an oiled ease.

“Jin Ling looked after it once we’ve raided the indoctrination office.” Wei WuXian said, patting the sword at his own side. Only now did Lan SiZhui notice Suibian there. “The Wen didn’t care for them much, but as much as we could tell, it is fine.”

Lan SiZhui nodded, enjoying the hum of the familiar energy. He didn’t mind Feixu and the Wen sword had been a good companion throughout his struggles, but Yingjiu had been his sword since the Lan Sect gifted it to him as he turned thirteen. No sword could replace that bond. While Feixu certainly resonated with him, Lan SiZhui felt like the two swords were

familiar with different parts of him. Feixu was more in synch with his emotions, but Yingjiu comforted him in the way he found peace in following the rules and solving issues with his thinking than with instant reaction.

“Thank you.” He looked up at Wei WuXian, who was studying him closely. At his gratitude, he grinned.

“Now, all you’re missing is your forehead ribbon and you’re back to the good old Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui’s breath hitched as his hand went to his wrist where he retied his forehead ribbon after bathing.

All the while he was in the Burial Mounds, he hadn’t put it on and it didn’t feel right to do so now, after he’d used demonic cultivation. He wondered if he should tie it on now, just to state Wei WuXian’s worries, but he felt an uncomfortable twist of his stomach at the thought.

“Mn. Perhaps, once I’ve returned to the Cloud Recesses.” He said without meeting Wei WuXian’s eyes. The other regarded him in silence for a long minute, then he picked up the food and handed it over.

“I brought some dried meat as well. I know you don’t eat meat, but I didn’t know how well vegetables would state your hunger.” He said, and Lan SiZhui unbound the cloth it had been carried.

“Thank you.” He said simply, tearing off some bread and taking small bites. He found he was not as squeamish about eating the dried meat as well. He figured, after what he was forced to eat in the Burial Mounds, he couldn’t be too picky and he agreed with Wei WuXian. That being said, he was confident once he had returned to his home, he’d not want to see meat – or worms, for that matter – for a good while.

Once he was unable to eat more, he felt his eyelids drooping. He always tired quicker lately, and the pull of sleep was familiar by now. His Golden Core was stronger than just hours ago in the Burial Mounds, but it didn’t mean he was fully healed. In fact, it was still incredibly weak.

“Rest. I’ll keep watch.” Wei WuXian said unexpectedly, and with embarrassment, Lan SiZhui had to realize he began dozing off as he sat. Now, he looked around and saw a bedroll laid next to the fire. He wondered where Wei WuXian stored that, but he had very little presence of mind to actually ask.



Lan SiZhui woke to the smell of something delicious cooking nearby. He sat up, his hand going to his head as a wave of vertigo passed over him. His ribs were aching again, but as he checked, he was pleased to note his Golden Core got stronger again. It was still far from being its usual strength, but he was relieved to know Wen ZhuLiu didn’t actually do serious damage to it.

Wei WuXian was stirring something in a pot above a fire. Lan SiZhui got out of the bedroll, moving to sit on one of the boulders framing the firepit. Wei WuXian grinned at him.

“You must’ve been exhausted. You slept through the day.” Lan SiZhui frowned, looking up at the sky, which, he noted, was a little darker than when he went to sleep. “Once we return to the inn, you’ll have a more comfortable place to sleep.” Lan SiZhui didn’t regard that with an answer, leaning above the pot to smell the soup instead. He frowned and looked up at Wei WuXian, who raised his eyebrows at him. “What?”

“Uh, Young Master Wei, what are you cooking?”

“It’s egg soup.” Wei WuXian answered, sounding somewhat defensive. Lan SiZhui hummed diplomatically. It smelled like rotting vegetables, though initially the smell pleased him as he woke, now that he had time to analyze the smell, it wasn’t pleasant. “Here, I think it’s done anyways.” He picked up a bowl from next to him, pouring some soup into it. Lan SiZhui wondered if he left to get these supplies from the village, and if he did, did he tell Jiang Cheng and Jin Ling he’d found Lan SiZhui.

He took the bowl and cautiously sipped from the soup, expecting the rotten vegetable smell to greet him in taste. He had to admit though, it didn’t taste half as bad as it smelled. He eagerly drank it all down. Wei WuXian grinned triumphantly at him.

“It’s good, Young Master Wei.”

“Hey!” Wei WuXian glared at him. “You’re saying that like it’s a great surprise!”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, and Wei WuXian frowned at him.

“Seriously? Have you even ever tasted anything I made to say such things?” Lan SiZhui thought for a moment, trying to remember if since they’ve arrived the past, did Wei WuXian even cook anything.

“Ah, I didn’t have a good diet in the past few months. It’s not that I don’t trust Young Master Wei’s skills, but I got used to the bad taste.”

Wei WuXian eyed him for a long while, then he sighed. “Lan SiZhui, you used to be gentle and nice to me. Why are you being so mean now?” Lan SiZhui thought back what he’d said that implied he was mean, and he felt his face heat when he realized. He didn’t mean to imply at least the soup was better than worms, even though that was the truth.

“Ah, that’s not what I meant. Even if I had a good diet I’d find your cooking fine!”

“Sure, sure.” Wei WuXian rolled his eyes, then poured some soup into another bowl. He didn’t make much, and so, the pot was now almost empty. Lan SiZhui watched as Wei WuXian took a sip, made a face, then his gaze flickered up to Lan SiZhui. He then made a pleased sound. “Ah, it is excellent! One of the best soups I’ve ever tasted!” He declared loudly, drinking down the whole thing. Unfortunately, his tightly shut eyes gave him away. Lan SiZhui repressed a chuckle.

They finished their meals in relative quietness, then Wei WuXian looked at him expectantly. Lan SiZhui knew what he wanted to know, but he was not ready to talk. Instead, he decided to point a question at Wei WuXian instead.

“Young Master Wei, earlier, you said you weren’t sure how you’ve found me.” He said slowly, and Wei WuXian hesitated, hand going to his shirt again, before he noticed and let it down, nodding his confirmation. “Young Master Wei, may I ask what you carry in that qiankun bag?”

Wei WuXian froze for a moment, then sighed dramatically. “Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui, you’re too smart.” He sighed, reaching in and pulling out the bag. “To be honest, I myself am not sure what this is. I didn’t even know I had it on me. I thought maybe it was some kind of artifact Uncle or Madam Yu put on me when we left Lotus Pier when it was attacked.”

He opened the bag and pulled out a black sword. Lan SiZhui had been to the Burial Mounds for months, and lately, he found he’d become quite attuned to resentful energy. Now, as he watched the sword, he could feel the cold aura of resentful energy surrounding it and frowned. It was a familiar sword, he’d seen it once before. It was also with Wei WuXian then. Right after the Xuanwu cave.

“I didn’t know I had it on me.” Wei WuXian admitted. “This morning, I woke to a strange, rattling sound. When I looked around, I saw this qiankun bag on the floor next to my discarded clothes. It was restless. I picked it up and felt the sense that it was trying to lead me somewhere, so I dressed, left Jiang Cheng sleeping and followed. When I realized it was leading me towards the Burial Mounds, I thought the resentful energy I felt coming from it was stirred by being near such a dark place. Then I saw you and the bag settled. It had been dormant ever since.” He admitted.

“This led you to where I was?” Lan SiZhui looked at the sword thoughtfully.

“Mn. It is strange. When you mentioned it earlier, I didn’t even remember it was on me. When I told you I don’t know how I found you, I was being honest, even though I’ve had it in my hand just minutes before.”

“So, when I asked you about it after Dusk Creek Mountain...” Wei WuXian shrugged.

“It was like that confrontation in the Tortoise’s belly never even happened. When I said I don’t know what sword you were talking about, I was being truthful, for at that time I didn’t remember it at all. Now, too, for a moment I forgot I had it in my hand.” He looked down at the sword.

“May I?” Lan SiZhui held out his hand, asking gently as if not to anger Wei WuXian. The other hesitated.

“Your Golden Core is still weak and the resentful energy is strong in this one. Are you sure?” Lan SiZhui didn’t comment on Wei WuXian’s assessment on his Golden Core. He had no illusions and knew that Wei WuXian most likely examined and searched his clothes while he slept as well.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, not bothering to tell him he’d been living in the resentful energy for months. Wei WuXian hesitated for a moment longer, then nodded and handed the sword over.

Instantly, Lan SiZhui wanted to drop it, but he didn't. The dark aura of the sword suggested that it was an extremely powerful source for resentful energy, and as Lan SiZhui closed his eyes, he also felt that not only was this a tool. There were resentful souls trapped into the iron. He never felt such strong presence, and after a few seconds of holding it, he realized what it was and almost dropped it.

This answered a lot of his questions about the past and present. They never knew how Wei WuXian acquired a shard of the Yin Iron and how he was able to use resentful energy without it killing him, even before he had the Stygian Tiger Amulet. Wei WuXian wasn't even aware what he had in his possession, and if what he said was true, the Iron didn't even let him get an idea about it for some reason.

It wasn't like the shards Wen RuoHan had. They were the shards of the original Yin Iron, the very same Xue ChongHai had once. It was raw with power, inelegant and violent. Wei WuXian's shard was already refined when he acquired it and he further refined it into the Stygian Tiger Amulet, therefore the resentful energy didn't have the same effect on him as it had on Wen RuoHan, nor was it as easy to pinpoint this was Yin Iron as well. Probably that was why the Wen never found the shard on Wei WuXian, even though they had their own that led them to the other shards.

Lan SiZhui wasn't above admitting he was scared. They had no idea where the last shard might be, and secretly, he started hoping with them changing the past, it would never surface. If they had it, that made them a target, no matter if Wen RuoHan was aware of their possession. They could hide it and prevent him from ever finding out they had in the first place, but...

But didn't this mean a huge advantage for them in the past when they killed Wen RuoHan and defeated his undead army? Back then, Wei WuXian had kept his possession in secret and nobody knew the Amulet was even Yin Iron until later. If he was to alert everyone of this fact, and they hid the shard, what would that mean to the outcome of the war?

"Lan SiZhui?" Wei WuXian asked after a few seconds and Lan SiZhui opened his eyes, looking at Wei WuXian contemplating his options. The other man would certainly agree with the advantage of having a Yin Iron shard against Wen RuoHan's army, but last time he did not know what he was working with and he'd created the Stygian Tiger Amulet from what he thought had been a secret ingredient. If he knew this was Yin Iron, would he also keep it a secret? Would they even be able to create something like the Stygian Tiger Amulet? Should they?

"Lan SiZhui?" Wei WuXian prompted, reaching out to take hold of the sword's hilt, looking worried.

"This is a powerful source of resentful energy." Lan SiZhui said, shaking off Wei WuXian's hand and replacing the sword in the qiankun bag. "We shouldn't leave it exposed."

"You know what this is?" Wei WuXian asked, looking thoughtful. From his expression, Lan SiZhui realized Wei WuXian had at least a strong suspicion about the nature of the sword.

“Mn.” He nodded. Wei WuXian pursed his lips, thinking. They were quiet for a while, then Wei WuXian stretched and stood.

“Ah, well, it is time we head back to YiLing. Jin Ling and Jiang Cheng must be wondering where I’ve gone by now. They’ll be delighted to learn I’ve found you.” He grinned. Lan SiZhui hesitated a moment too long though and Wei WuXian noticed. “What’s wrong? Are you still unwell?” He reached out, as if he intended to feel Lan SiZhui’s pulse.

“Ah, Young Master Wei, I’m fine.” He stood as well, smiling tightly at Wei WuXian. The other studied him for a minute, then nodded.

“Then let’s go.” He leaned down and began packing up. After a moment, Lan SiZhui also helped, his mind working relentlessly.

Originally, he planned to find Wen Chao and question him about Wen Ning, but then Wei WuXian found him, who happily told him Jin Ling and Jiang Cheng were also close. Lan SiZhui was unsure what his next step should be. He could get away from Wei WuXian, although it would create more questions than Lan SiZhui was comfortable with. But if he went with Wei WuXian, how would he go find Wen Ning?

It wasn’t that he didn’t think Jin Ling or even Jiang Cheng would be willing to help him out. It was only that he might be their friend and they might enjoy taking revenge on Wen Chao for their own reasons, Wen Ning was not close to them. They had no reason to help the boy. Jin Ling hated him for his father’s death, even if that did not happen in this time yet, and Jiang Cheng always had a deep dislike towards the Wen. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure how the other would react if Lan SiZhui would ask him to save one of them.

This problem occupied Lan SiZhui’s mind as they picked up the camp. He could, should get away from Wei WuXian, but he didn’t think he could give a good reason for his absence and unwillingness to meet the others. Wei WuXian would demand answers or ask him to go with. If he told him the truth, Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure how Wei WuXian would react to that. As of now, he wasn’t the Grandmaster of demonic cultivation. He didn’t even practice it. For all his talk about resentful energy, Lan SiZhui could easily imagine the other boy thinking of demonic cultivation as something evil.

He was still thinking on this as they headed out. He walked by Wei WuXian’s side quietly. Eventually, the other boy got tired of his silence and asked:

“Lan SiZhui, will you tell me where you’ve spent this past three months?”

Before Lan SiZhui could answer though, another, new voice spoke up.

“He was, of course, carrying out a mission to aid his birth family!” Lan SiZhui instructively reached for Hudie, but before he could get it out of the qiankun pouch, there was a slight pressure on his back. He froze, his hand halfway to the bag at his side. Looking over, he saw Wei WuXian in a similar situation, his sword half-drawn, but another was pressing between his shoulder blades. “Isn’t that right, Lan SiZhui?”



Finally, the owner of this voice entered their line of vision. While the night had been dark around them, the woods eerie, the only light the slight moonlight, now guards with torches stepped out from between the trees. Lan SiZhui watched as directly in front of them, Wen Chao also stepped forward, chin up and Wen ZhuLiu at his side.

“Wen Chao?” Wei WuXian sneered. “What are you doing here?”

“YiLing is still Wen jurisdiction, isn’t it?” Wen Chao raised his eyebrows. Wei WuXian tilted his head to the side, his shoulders losing some of their tension as he let his sword slide back into its scabbard.

“Well, we’re here to change that.”

“You and what army?” Wen Chao snorted, then dismissively looked away, right at Lan SiZhui. He tilted his head to the side. “So, you’ve survived. Bravo, I didn’t think you would.”

“Young Master Wen.” Lan SiZhui nodded to him. He noted bitterly that a part of him was relieved Wen Chao was here. This only meant he could ask his questions without having to hunt him down and without involving any of his friends – well, except Wei WuXian, of course. But Wen Chao didn’t seem interested in the other, so as long as his attention was on Lan SiZhui, he wasn’t worried. He won’t make the same mistake again.

“Lan SiZhui. We’ve had a deal.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “If I remember correctly, your condition was a week.”

“That’s right.” Wen Chao nodded with an appreciating look. “But as long as you obey the other conditions, I’m not picky about accepting your end.”

“Lan SiZhui, what is he talking about?” Wei WuXian asked, looking at Wen Chao from the corner of his eyes, while his head was turned towards Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui ignored him.

“Young Master, I hope you understand, but I cannot hold up my end of this deal if you did not either. If you want the Yin Iron, then I expect Wen Ning to be alive.”

“And what if he’s dead?” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together defiantly. “Search them.” Wen Chao ordered. Lan SiZhui was thankful he froze on the spot when he was ordered. Now, as soon as the pressure was gone from his back, he pulled out Hudie. He dodged the first swipe of the sword with the same movement, and he vaguely sensed that next to him Wei WuXian also pulled out Suibian to fight.

Lan SiZhui wasn’t worried about the soldiers surrounding them, but he was rather concentrated on Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu. The latter moved as soon as he realized what was happening, and Lan SiZhui quickly played a few notes on his guqin.

It didn’t take long for the resentful energy to emerge. They were still close to the Burial Mounds, and even if those souls could not leave, there were enough forgotten here whom were mostly dormant normally that once the black fog surrounded them, they were completely enclosed in the darkness.

“Lan SiZhui!” He heard Wei WuXian cry out next to him, and he reached over carefully, taking hold of Wei WuXian’s arm. He saw Suibian swing in his direction, but he was quick to move out of the way.

“It’s me. Stay close.” Lan SiZhui said. Wei WuXian huffed, then he pressed close to Lan SiZhui, taking his order literally and pressing their sides and backs together. Lan SiZhui kept up an even tone with the guqin, but while it would disorient their enemies, it would not stop them for a long time.

“What is this? Why is there so much resentful energy surrounding us?” Wei WuXian asked cautiously.

“It isn’t hurting us.” Lan SiZhui tried to reassure him.

“Yes, I noticed that too. Why is that, I wonder?” Wei WuXian asked quietly next to him. Lan SiZhui swallowed, keeping up his soft play. “Are you playing something to keep it away?”

“There’s no time to explain. When I give the sign, head towards YiLing.”

“And you?”

“Me and Wen Chao have something to settle first.”

“If this is about Wen Ning being dead, then I am also staying.” Wei WuXian said defiantly. Lan SiZhui sighed, knowing he had no choice. Wei WuXian wasn’t the kind to leave things alone once he was involved in something.

He recalled the notes he’d written in the Burial Mounds and changed his play to a sharper tone, making the resentful energy around them change. He had never used resentful energy this way before, and he half-expected it not to work. It wouldn’t be the first time. He also disliked doing this greatly. He hadn’t intended to ever use demonic cultivation to harm others, only if he had no other choice. It seemed like after all, he was truly like his former adoptive father.

He ordered the resentful energy to do his bidding, then cleared it, so they could see again. Once the ink-like fog dissipated, they saw several bodies on the ground, many of which were dead. Lan SiZhui felt sick, knowing he was the one to do this. The men bled from seven orifices, terror on their faces as they died. There were only five or so people still standing.

Lan SiZhui looked over and saw Wen Chao frowning deeply, his hand holding a talisman to his chest. Wen ZhuLiu also had one on, so did two guards behind them. Lan SiZhui laid his hand flat on the strings to quiet them, looking at Wen Chao.

“What was this?” Wen Chao demanded, eyes wide as he looked over at Wen ZhuLiu. The other man was looking around themselves, sneer on his face as he took in the dead bodies. Then, he noticed Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian looking and his features smoothed out, his eyes narrowing as he studied Hudie in Lan SiZhui’s hand. “Lan SiZhui, your spiritual energy must’ve returned if you could ward yourselves from the resentful energy with your guqin. I should’ve taken that from you as well. I can see you’ve recovered your sword after all.”

“Young Master Wen, you didn’t answer my question.” Lan SiZhui said. “Is Wen Ning alive?”

“I told you, you had a week to bring me the Yin Iron, Lan SiZhui.” Wen Chao sneered. “Three months had passed. What do you expect?” Lan SiZhui pressed his teeth together.

“In that case Young Master Wen, I hope you understand, but as Wen Ning’s cousin, it is my right to take revenge for his death.”

“Is it your right, Lan SiZhui?” Wen Chao wondered aloud, stepping away from his guards, beginning to pace even though he was still behind Wen ZhuLiu. “We’ve had a deal. I acted according to our prearranged conditions. By that logic, do you have the right to take revenge for Wen Ning’s death?”

“Perhaps you’re right, Wen Chao,” Wei WuXian spoke suddenly, “but I’ve made no deal with you. You’ve killed a good friend of mine, so for that, I will kill you.” He said with a sharp look.

“Wei WuXian, I don’t think you understand what’s happening here.” Wen Chao said looking down his nose at the other. “Perhaps you think you’ve got the upper hand, but Wen ZhuLiu and Lan SiZhui dueled twice and both times Lan SiZhui came out loser. Right now, even his Golden Core is weak and damaged. How long do you think the two of you would last in this fight?”

“Wen Chao, you also forget something.” Wei WuXian said with an arrogant tone.

“Huh? What would that be?” Wen Chao asked back, equally as arrogant.

“I have also fought you before, and if I remember right, you lost then. What makes you think you’ll win now?”

Wen Chao chuckled, shaking his head. “Let me tell you how this is going to go, Wei WuXian. I am not going to fight you, nor Lan SiZhui with Wen ZhuLiu. I will order Wen ZhuLiu to attack you and once he has you on the ground, writhing in pain from having your core crushed, I am going to ask Lan SiZhui for the Yin Iron, and he will hand it over, so you can live.”

Perhaps Wen Chao was right. Perhaps that would’ve happened if Lan SiZhui was without his spiritual powers and without an effective weapon against Wen Chao. Lan SiZhui hadn’t studied the YiLing Patriarch’s texts much, but he remembered that unless a place was purged from resentful energy, there were corpses everywhere to be called forth if needed. This knowledge came handy now as he recalled some notes from his demonic music sheets.

Lan SiZhui was not experienced in controlling fierce corpses. The most he’d done in the Burial Mounds was to keep them away from himself and the only time he used them to fight was against the ancient soldier. But now, that he knew how, he knew what he had to do.

And so, he plucked the strings of Hudie, watching as the soldiers behind Wen Chao braced themselves, Wen Chao’s eyes going wide. Wen ZhuLiu didn’t seem phased by the sound.

When a few moments passed without anything happening, Wen Chao looked around himself, then laughed.

“Lan SiZhui, it seems like your musical cultivation had failed you this time.”

“It did not.” Lan SiZhui reassured him, and sure enough, a few moments later, one of the Wen soldiers cried out and dropped his sword. Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu were confused as they looked back and even Wei WuXian stepped forward, hand tightening on Suibian to see what had happened.

Before they could really register the hands that had broke through the soil and grabbed onto the soldier’s ankles, the other also cried out in alarm, slashing down with his sword as another hand grabbed him as well.

“What is this?!” Wen Chao cried, startled. A moment later though, he seemed to connect the dots and looked back. “It’s him! Lan SiZhui is controlling the corpses!”

“Lan SiZhui?” Wei WuXian asked, sounding like he haven’t heard the name before.

“Kill him!” Wen Chao cried, pointing at Lan SiZhui. Before he could summon more corpses, Wen ZhuLiu turned as well and leapt forward, sword pointing at Lan SiZhui. He got past Wei WuXian, who realized what was happening a moment later. By then, Wen ZhuLiu had reached Lan SiZhui, whom jumped away from the man, his song coming to a halt as he was forced to put away his guqin. He pulled out Feixu, meeting Wen ZhuLiu’s sword with his own on his next attack.

“Lan SiZhui!” Wei WuXian called out.

“Capture Wen Chao!” Lan SiZhui said, and at this, Wen ZhuLiu looked back. He made an annoyed sound, moving to defend Wen Chao from Wei WuXian’s attack. Lan SiZhui leapt after him to stop him and they were, once again, engaged in a duel.

Lan SiZhui had to admit, Wen ZhuLiu was a strong opponent. Even though for some reason he did not use spiritual energy to match Lan SiZhui’s strikes, as if not wishing to best him in an unfair duel, he was much more experienced than Lan SiZhui. They crossed swords several times before Wen ZhuLiu resorted to his usual technique. Lan SiZhui saw the blow coming, but he had no way to stop it before his chest was struck.

He fell backwards, landing hard on Feixu’s scabbard. He looked up, sure that this was the moment Wen ZhuLiu would kill him, but the other man only stood and watched him. Lan SiZhui’s eyebrows furrowed as he climbed on his feet.

“You could’ve killed me.”

“Yes.” Wen ZhuLiu replied simply.

“Why didn’t you?” Lan SiZhui wondered aloud. Wen ZhuLiu was quiet for a long moment. From not far, they could hear Wen Chao and Wei WuXian crossing swords, but they were too engaged in their own battle to really take notice.

“When Wen Chao first offered to take you into the Wen Sect, why did you say no?”

“Because I do not wish to belong to a family that will go down in history being known as an evil, power-hungry Sect.” Lan SiZhui answered after a surprised pause.

“You knew before you saw evidence of this.” Wen ZhuLiu concluded. Lan SiZhui nodded unsurely. “How?”

“Wen RuoHan was searching for the Yin Iron pieces. What other reason would he have to do that?” Lan SiZhui frowned. Wen ZhuLiu seemed to think of that for a moment. “Sir, may I also ask a question?” Wen ZhuLiu didn’t answer, just kept watching him. “Why are you on their side?”

“I am repaying a debt.” Wen ZhuLiu said.

“Does repaying it worth doing the things you do?” At that, Wen ZhuLiu’s jaw clenched. Before he could answer though, Wen Chao cried out. As the two looked over they saw him lying on his back on the ground, Wei WuXian standing over him with Suibian’s point under his chin. There was a pause, then Lan SiZhui saw Wen ZhuLiu move minutely. “Sir, if you attack Wei WuXian, I will be forced to kill you.” He said. “Please, stay put.”

“Stand up.” Wei WuXian told Wen Chao. Clumsily, the other obeyed the order, glaring at Wei WuXian. Seeing Wen ZhuLiu move closer, Lan SiZhui sheathed Feixu and pulled out Hudie, his fingers poisoned on the right strings. “Now, let us have a chat, Wen Chao.” Wei WuXian grinned.

“Wei WuXian. I have no beef with you. There is no need for you to be involved in this matter.” Wen Chao said, and if Lan SiZhui wasn’t watching him, he wouldn’t have noticed the movement of his arm as he reached his sword forward. Wei WuXian stepped closer, the tip of his blade pressing against the soft skin under Wen Chao’s chin. Lan SiZhui still played some notes.

“Drop the sword, Wen Chao.” Wen Chao huffed, looking away, then he turned back and suddenly raised the sword. Fortunately, before it could even touch Wei WuXian, hands suddenly gripped Wen Chao’s arms and pulled him back.

Wei WuXian stumbled a step back as he just now noticed the half-rotten fierce corpse behind Wen Chao. Lan SiZhui ceased his play and Wen Chao looked over with a sneer.

“The model student of GusuLan, hero of the battle in Lotus Pier, esteemed cultivator using resentful energy as a weapon? Lan SiZhui, this time you really stooped low.” This gave Wei WuXian a pause as he looked over his shoulder at Lan SiZhui. He studied the other for a long moment, then he turned back to Wen Chao.

“Doesn’t your own father collect shards of the Yin Iron?” He asked arrogantly. “Does this also mean you think your own Sect had stooped low as well?” Wen Chao seemed angry at that question, but instead of answering, he turned to Lan SiZhui.

“So, you want revenge on me for what I’ve done with Wen Ning? Tell me, Lan SiZhui, how come you’re so loyal to him, yet you refuse to join your family in this war?”

“Wen Ning is nothing like you or your father.” Wei WuXian sneered at him.

“He’s nothing special either.” Wen Chao shrugged. “His death is insignificant.” Lan SiZhui felt anger rise inside himself and he found himself plucking the strings of the guqin unconsciously. When he noticed, it was only because multiple things happened at once.

Wen Chao cried out in pain, but his shout wasn’t the only one cutting through the stillness of the night. Another voice called out his name, a familiar one he hadn’t heard in almost six months, and he turned, eyes wide towards the tree line where he heard it coming from.

A moment later, he laid eyes on the most ridiculous group of people. Jiang Cheng and Jin Ling he expected, but the two white figures next to them seemed incredibly out of place. Lan SiZhui saw that Lan WangJi flanked the group, but his attention was on something else, someone else.

“JingYi!” Lan SiZhui cried out, bagging his guqin without a second thought.

This was like receiving Yingjiu once again, and even though they were never casual with their touches, now both boys greeted each other with open arms. Lan SiZhui embraced his best friend tightly. It was like he hadn’t even realized how much he’d missed Lan JingYi. Earlier, he’d convinced himself he wasn’t worried about the other boy, because his history studies proved Lan XiChen was well and alive for three months before he returned to the Cloud Recesses. Nobody really knew much about that time, but they assumed he was hiding somewhere safe. And so, Lan SiZhui was sure Lan JingYi was safe with him, that even though they were changing the past, his friend would turn up in a few weeks and it would be not different than other times they’ve spent apart.

He had to admit now, this was, perhaps, not as true as he first thought and he feared for his best friend. It felt like a boulder was rolled off his shoulder as he saw, heard and embraced Lan JingYi again and he found his throat blocked and his eyes moist, but he didn’t mind. He refused to grunt in pain as his aching ribs were further squeezed. They stayed in the embrace for a long time, then someone cleared their throat next to them.

“It’s like we aren’t even here.” Jiang Cheng grumbled, and as the two pulled away, they saw Jiang Cheng next to them, Jin Ling even closer, his arms crossed over his chest, looking annoyed. He was back in Jin clothing and his bow was slung over his shoulder. Lan SiZhui smiled at Jin Ling, who just raised a skeptical eyebrow, so Lan SiZhui decided to be diplomatic and bowed to both of them.

“Young Master Jiang. Jin Ling. It’s good to see you again.”

“I promised myself if I see you again, I will strangle you.” Jin Ling told him with a dark look. “So, give me a good reason why I shouldn’t.”

“Young Mistress, why don’t you save that to Wen Chao?” Lan JingYi raised his eyebrows, pointedly looking over Jin Ling’s shoulder. Lan SiZhui now also saw that in the meantime,

Wen Chao had been released from the fierce corpse's clutches and been tied up with a rope. The fierce corpse seemed to have been eliminated, so Lan SiZhui was relieved. The two holding the soldiers were also nowhere to be seen, though the soldiers were also dead. Wen ZhuLiu was tied up as well, though he looked much less bothered by this. Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi stood over them, watching them.

"Wen Chao will answer for his crimes, don't worry." Jiang Cheng said with a dark look towards the Wen. "I cannot wait to see what my mother does to him, once he's in front of her."

"Young Master Wen, you hear that?" Wei WuXian looked at the man. "There are people lining up to kill you. Ah, and we haven't even talked about what you've done to Lan SiZhui."

"What had he done to Lan SiZhui?" Jin Ling frowned, looking back at Lan SiZhui questioningly, who sighed softly and shook his head.

"This is a long tale. Second Young Master Lan." Lan SiZhui bowed to the man who inclined his head in acknowledgement. "May I ask Young Master Wen a question?"

"Will you be able to hold yourself back this time?" Lan WangJi asked, his gaze sharp and strict. Lan SiZhui swallowed, looking away, realizing that Lan WangJi must've seen what Lan SiZhui had done. It was quiet for a long moment, then softer, Lan WangJi said: "You will be able to question him once we've returned to the Cloud Recesses or to Lotus Pier. You will also be able to tell us this long tale." He said pointedly, and not meeting his eyes, Lan SiZhui nodded and bowed to him, ignoring the looks his friends gave him.

# Righteousness I.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They didn't linger in the woods for long. They were cautious about returning to YiLing – even though with Wen Chao at sword point, they could make the Wen do anything, they still didn't want to risk going into Wen jurisdiction. Since Lotus Pier was closest, Jiang Cheng suggested that should be where they were going. Wei WuXian took Lan SiZhui on his sword, while Lan JingYi took Jin Ling. Wen Chao was taken by Jiang Cheng, Wen ZhuLiu with Lan WangJi, so everyone carried an extra person on their swords.

When Lan SiZhui was asked why he couldn't fly, he gave a generic excuse of being too tired – which was true enough to not feel like a lie. He didn't want to reveal just yet that his Golden Core was still in poor shape, though Wei WuXian and Wen ZhuLiu gave him curious glances.

They reached Lotus Pier smoothly, without any issues. Even Wen Chao waited until they were in the reception hall to complain. As they entered Lotus Pier, Lan SiZhui looked around, expecting a similar sight that had greeted him a few months ago in Cloud Recesses, with buildings burnt and then half built back up, tools laying around, bodies collected to the side.

Curiously, Lotus Pier looked not much worse for wear than it had when Lan SiZhui last saw it. In the dim light of the lanterns hung around the main courtyard it looked other than some damage to the main buildings, there was not much more done to the Jiang Sect's home.

Once they were led to the reception hall, they were told to wait. Apparently, Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng had been away for some time and returning with the Lan and Wen Chao as a prisoner was worth rousing the Sect Leader from sleep to greet them. As they settled, Lan SiZhui wondered if this would be a good opportunity to ask Wen Chao about Wen Ning, but from the way everyone kept one eye on the Second Young Master of the Wen Sect, he suspected he'd need to wait a little more.

“You're going to hang for this. My father will not stand for this.” Wen Chao said as he shifted uncomfortably.

“Young Master Wen, who would tell your father you've been captured?” Wei WuXian asked in a bored tone as he kept pacing the hall. “Nobody survived to tell the tale and I hardly think you expected to run into us as we also didn't expect to run into you.” That was true enough.

While the two soldiers flanking Wen Chao had survived Lan SiZhui's first attack, they got caught by fierce corpses. One managed to escape, but Wei WuXian killed him. The other had died when Lan SiZhui unconsciously made the fierce corpse holding Wen Chao tighten his grip, and the corpse that held the other soldier also reacted to the command and killed the other guard.

“He will know, Wei WuXian, you just wait.” Wen Chao said, huffing.



“What’s this commotion so late in the evening?!” Came the familiar voice of Madam Yu. Lan SiZhui found that despite knowing she had been safe during this whole time, he still felt relieved at the confirmation.

Once the two Sect Heads entered the reception hall, all newcomers bowed to them. Once they looked up, they saw Jiang FengMian eying Wen Chao with furrowed brows and Madam Yu frowning at Wen ZhuLiu.

“There isn’t even enough honor in you to die in battle before you’re caught?” Madam Yu sneered.

“My lady.” Jiang FengMian held up a hand. “Why don’t we listen to the explanation first?” He then turned to Lan WangJi. “Second Young Master Lan, I’ve heard with great relief about your brother’s return.”

“ZeWu-Jun is back?” Wei WuXian sounded enthusiastic about this, and so was Lan SiZhui. He was glad though, that he wasn’t the one to ask – it would’ve sounded stupid, seeing Lan JingYi was here, and he blamed fatigue and their current occupation for not connecting those dots.

“Mn. Thank you. Brother is healthy and sends his regards.” Lan WangJi bowed to the Sect Leader.

“When did this happen, Lan Zhan? Why didn’t you tell me?” Wei WuXian pouted.

“A few days ago, when I was called back to the Cloud Recesses.” Lan WangJi told him, and Lan SiZhui blinked, surprised. Lan JingYi and Lan XiChen only returned now? But it had been much more than three months since they’ve been gone! Lan SiZhui looked over at Lan JingYi questioningly, who made a gesture Lan SiZhui interpreted as ‘we’ll talk later’. A second later he saw Lan JingYi give the same signal to Jin Ling.

“Ah, where had he been all this time? It’s been almost six months!” Wei WuXian frowned.

“He will not say.” Lan WangJi’s gaze, curiously, flickered towards Lan JingYi before turning back to Wei WuXian. “Let us talk about this later.”

“As I know you Lan Zhan, there won’t be much talking.” Wei WuXian pouted. “Or I will talk and you will listen.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian chuckled at that, but Sect Leader Jiang quickly diverted their attention.

“To this matter at hand, A-Cheng, what had happened? I thought you and A-Xian were looking for Lan SiZhui with Jin Ling.”

“Father, I am... unsure what had happened.” Jiang Cheng admitted. “Wei WuXian would know better, he should be the one to say.”

“Why him and not you?” Madam Yu glared at her son. “Are you unable to speak?”

“Ah, Madam Yu, Jiang Cheng wasn’t there when this happened.” Wei WuXian said.

“What had happened, A-Xian?” Jiang FengMian’s forehead wrinkled.

“Uncle Jiang, what happened was this: Jin Ling proposed we first look for Lan SiZhui in YiLing, since that was where he last saw him. We’ve planned on asking around in town, see if anyone knew anything. Our first two days there were fruitless, then one morning...” He hesitated, looking over at Lan SiZhui. While he didn’t wish to broadcast his demonic cultivation to the world, he didn’t expect Wei WuXian to lie on his behalf, so he gazed back calmly. Still, Wei WuXian seemed defiant and turned back to the Sect heads. “One morning, I decided to take a walk. I was unable to sleep, the bed was so uncomfortable. After finding no one awake and nothing interesting, I decided to look around. That’s when I ran into Lan SiZhui.”

“You just happened to come across him?” Jiang Cheng asked skeptically.

“As I said! He looked pathetic. He had some Wen clothes on, but they were all torn and dirty. He was also unwashed and hungry and tired. I figured he’d just managed to get out wherever he’d been prisoned, and so I offered him to bathe and eat and rest before Jin Ling made good on his promise and throttled him.” He grinned at Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes.

“And how did you come across Wen Chao?” Madam Yu frowned. “Did he, too, jump out from between the bushes?”

“Ah, yes, actually.” Wei WuXian grinned, nodding. “Me and Lan SiZhui were about to head back to YiLing when suddenly, Wen Chao was there, searching for the Yin Iron. He believed it was with us for some reason.”

“For some reason you say, yet you know why.” Wen Chao smirked. “I’ve had a deal with Lan SiZhui and he was supposed to bring me the Yin Iron.”

“Stop lying!” Jin Ling snapped, stepping towards the other man, but Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui quickly took hold of him.

“Ask Lan SiZhui then, did I lie?” Wen Chao raised his eyebrow.

“Well?!” Madam Yu asked a moment later, chin lifted. Lan SiZhui nodded, feeling shy in the face of so much attention on him.

“Yes. Young Master Wen threatened my cousin’s life. He said I either took him to the Sect Leader Jiang and his wife or bring him the Yin Iron.”

“But where would you find the Yin Iron? If me and Lan Zhan didn’t have a shard of our own, we wouldn’t have found out where the others used to be.” Wei WuXian frowned. Lan SiZhui looked away.

“Ah, don’t you know? Lan SiZhui knows where the last shard is. Either that, or he’s a liar, but I believe your Sect’s rule is not to lie, correct, Lan SiZhui?” Wen Chao raised his eyebrows.

“I did not lie.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“So, do you have the Yin Iron shard?” Wen Chao pried.

“Is Wen Ning alive?”

“Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui, the same question again and again.” Wen Chao clicked his tongue, annoyed. “Aren’t you tired of it?”

“Young Master Wen, I will not stop asking until you give me a truthful and straightforward answer.” Lan SiZhui told him seriously and Wen Chao rolled his eyes, snorting before turning away from Lan SiZhui.

“We do not care about your cousin, Wen SiZhui.” Madam Yu snapped, then turned back to Wei WuXian. “What happened after?”

“Of course, we engaged in battle.” Wei WuXian shrugged. “We’ve just won when Jiang Cheng and the others showed up.” Lan SiZhui appreciated that Wei WuXian left out his involvement with resentful energy.

“You want us to believe you and Wen SiZhui bested Wen Chao’s troops and Wen ZhuLiu on your own?” Madam Yu scoffed. Wei WuXian shrugged.

“There was only six or so troops and Lan SiZhui is a skilled fighter.”

“Do not lie to me, Wei WuXian.” Madam Yu glared at him.

“Madam Yu, that’s enough.” Jiang FengMian said placatingly, placing a hand on her arm. “The boys had done good tonight. They’d captured Wen Chao and the Core-Melting Hand. For now, let this matter drop. A-Xian and Lan SiZhui will give us a proper report tomorrow and then we shall discuss what to do now.” He paused. “I believe this had been a long day for you all. Second Young Master Lan, esteemed guests, we will have some rooms prepared for you. Boys, you two go and retire to your own rooms. I do not want to hear you awake tonight.”

“What about Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu?” Wei WuXian asked.

“They will be placed in good care.” Jiang FengMian nodded. “Do not fret. Go and rest.”

“Yes.” Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng bowed to their Sect Leader, and with one last glance at the prisoners, then one at Lan SiZhui from Wei WuXian, they departed.

Soon, the reception hall became a flurry of activity as servants and guards came in, received their orders, then took all of them away. On their way to the guest quarters, Lan JingYi stayed close to Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling.

“Should we catch up tonight?” Jin Ling asked, looking over the two of them. Lan JingYi shook his head.

“As much as I cannot wait to talk to you two, I’ve been traveling and running around all day. And Lan SiZhui just battled.” He threw a cautious glance at Lan SiZhui. “And no offense, but you look like you could use some rest, SiZhui.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed, eyelids already drooping.

There were enough rooms for them all, so after parting words, the four of them retired for the night, Lan WangJi gazing at Lan SiZhui with a significant look that implied a serious talk was in order. Lan SiZhui was too tired to think of such matters, so he wordlessly nodded and disappeared into the room.

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Lan SiZhui woke with a start, looking around himself. It took him a minute to remember where he was, then he realized what woke him was knocking on his door. He rubbed at his eyes as he quickly got out of the bed and pulled on an outer layer, and he went to open his door.

Jin Ling and Lan JingYi were waiting there, Jin Ling looking like he had better things to do, while Lan JingYi seemed somewhat concerned before he schooled his expression.

“Good morning!” He greeted cheerfully.

“Good morning.” Lan SiZhui smiled at them.

“If this morning could be called good.” Jin Ling grumbled. “It’s cold and early. Let’s just get this over with.”

“What?” Lan SiZhui was confused.

“Let’s talk.” Lan JingYi said. “I’m anxious to hear about what you’ve been up to while I was away.” He grinned, bumping shoulders with Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes at that.

“Ah, excuse me. A minute and I’ll be ready.” Lan SiZhui apologized, face heating in embarrassment.

“Once you do, come to my room next door.” Jin Ling said. “We’re having breakfast together, so we can talk.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded and smiled at them once more. He didn’t get any new clothes from the Jiang Sect yet, so he put on the clothes he had on yesterday, the black underrobes and the dark blue outer layer. He hesitated when tying on his headband, but having Lan WangJi here solved that issue; he couldn’t be seen without his headband around the Second Jade of Lan.

He knocked on Jin Ling’s door a few minutes later and Lan JingYi opened it with a smile. They sat around Jin Ling’s table, their breakfast already on the table. Lan SiZhui noted as he stepped out of his rooms it was still dark, the bottom of the sky just brightening. He didn’t know how it was that Jin Ling was also already up, but he admitted himself he’d rather get the conversation over with before they had to be present for any official business.

He wasn’t sure what poor soul the two woke up in order to get them al breakfast ready though.

Once they were all done with their breakfast, Jin Ling served them tea, then applied a silencing talisman and began their discussion.

“So, where have you been all this time, Lan SiZhui?” Jin Ling asked, frowning. “I thought you were supposed to send a message if you got captured.”

“Ah, wait a moment.” Lan JingYi raised his hand. “I’ve only been back for a few days. While I’ve heard bigger news while we were hiding, I still don’t know what went down exactly while I was away.”

“Ah, right.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “How come you’ve been away for so long?”

“Let’s not ask questions all around.” Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed. “You sound like we’re on a discussion conference. Just pick someone to start talking.”

“Then Lan SiZhui, tell me, what happened after you sent me away?” Lan JingYi turned to Lan SiZhui eagerly. Lan SiZhui hesitated, not wanting to be the first to talk, then decided not to fuss and began his tale.

He told Lan JingYi about how him and Lan WangJi were taken to Qishan, how Wen Chao figured out he knew of the Yin Iron, then about the Xuanwu cave. When he told Lan JingYi about Feixu, the other wanted to see the sword, so Lan SiZhui fetched it. After Lan JingYi examined the sword, putting it aside without a comment, Lan SiZhui told him about the battle to reclaim Cloud Recesses.

After this, Jin Ling actually took over and told Lan JingYi what he had been doing during these events, then told him about the battle of Lotus Pier, their escape. Lan JingYi looked like he wanted to say something, but he held himself back, listening to the tale attentively. Jin Ling told Lan JingYi about how Wen Qing took them in, then when he got to the part where they fled from Wen Chao, he halted.

“This is when we lost Lan SiZhui.” He said, looking at the other expectantly. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“Since you’re already speaking, why don’t you first tell us what had happened to you since then?” Lan JingYi asked. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure if it was because he sensed Lan SiZhui’s discomfort or because he was curious, but he was thankful for the diversion anyhow.

“Fine.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Once he began, Lan SiZhui knew to take his words with some skepticism, for Jin Ling wasn’t interested in relaying conversations as they were, but he still listened attentively. The story went like this:

Once they’ve parted at the carriage, Jin Ling helped Sect Leader Jiang through YiLing. A guard stopped them once, asking who they were and where they were going. Jin Ling quickly diverted his suspicion in his usual way: he’d snapped at the guard, asking:

“How is this any of your business?! Can’t you see my senior Wen is injured? I am taking him home to heal of course!” This, apparently worked, because the guard seemed embarrassed of asking in the first place and even offered to lead them to their boat. Jin Ling told him: “At least more idiots won’t stop us on our way if you also come!”

They went to the docks and truly enough, nobody stopped them again. Jin Ling suspected they should’ve asked for guard clothes from Wen Qing and then Lan SiZhui and Madam Yu could’ve gone with them as well.

At the docks, he asked the harbormaster if there was a boat waiting for Wen Qing’s guests. Indeed there was, and Jin Ling waved off the guard then, telling him to make himself useful somewhere else. Jin Ling then laid the Sect Leader into the boat and gave him medicine, ordering their rower to wait until midnight to depart.

Madam Yu appeared only a few minutes later, and wanted to depart immediately. Her and Jin Ling had a fight about this aboard the ship, but not wanting to raise attention, Jin Ling told her:

“You are not my Sect Leader, you cannot command me. I am the only one present with a weapon, and if you care for your life, we will wait for Lan SiZhui.”

Of course, this was not so easily settled. Madam Yu argued: “You arrogant child, you wouldn’t dare even think about raising your weapon against me. I might not be your Sect Leader, but I’ll see to it that Sect Leader Jin will have you punished for this attitude, and I will be compensated for this offense.”

To which Jin Ling replied: “As you wish, but we are still waiting for Lan SiZhui, no matter what you say.”

Madam Yu then accepted this, but said they’d only wait until nightfall, but Jin Ling rejected the idea, saying they will wait until midnight as discussed. Madam Yu was not happy about this, and only said: “We will see about that.” And went inside the cabin to tend to Sect Leader Jiang.

As agreed, Jin Ling waited until midnight, during which time he argued with Madam Yu once more. In the end, he gave up and ordered the rower to head out. They traveled for a few days until they’ve reached Meishan, where Jiang YanLi, Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian were already waiting for them. They told the others what had happened, and for a few days, Meishan was in an uproar about Sect Leader Jiang’s condition. If it wasn’t for their mother and grandmother, the Jiang children would’ve spent all day by their fathers’ side, but in the end, they were forced to train.

Jin Ling spent the first few days in the infirmary as well, but once his wound was better and a week and half had passed, he was anxious to look for Lan SiZhui. He got ready to leave, but before he could, guards caught him and asked him what he was thinking of doing.

“I have business elsewhere.” Jin Ling told them, but they haven’t accepted this answer, stating the Yu Clan Leader forbid anyone from entering or exiting who were not preapproved,

and therefore he had to first ask for permission. Annoyed, Jin Ling went to Clan Leader Yu with his request, but unfortunately found Madam Yu with her.

“You will not go back for that Wen boy.” Madam Yu stated firmly when he proposed his idea. Clan Leader Yu didn’t seem interested in the whole affair, leaving the matter to her daughter.

“Why is what I’m doing any of your business, Madam Yu? We will go back to Gusu then, if you don’t want us here.” Jin Ling told her then.

“Have you not said you have family ties in the Jiang Sect? So, why do you care more for that boy than your own familiar Sect?” She asked him.

“Lan SiZhui is also my family.” Jin Ling answered defiantly.

“He has more family than you do now, so maybe you should turn your focus on those who need you. By your family ties, you’re obliged to help the Jiang Sect.”

They continued their argument in this fashion, then Jin Ling stormed out, feeling he wouldn’t win this fight. He went to the Sect Leader Jiang then, hoping he would be able to sway his wife, but the Sect Leader agreed. He said:

“While I understand your frustration and need to find Lan SiZhui, unfortunately it would be more dangerous to go. Lan SiZhui is strong and he proved he can handle Wen Chao before. While I also worry for him, I am confident he will be alright. With Lotus Pier in Wen hands and our Sect broken into pieces, many of which had already been washed down the river, we need you to stay here in safety. Perhaps, Lan SiZhui also thought of this and returned to Gusu?”

While Lan SiZhui doubted these were Jiang FengMian’s exact words, Jin Ling refused to describe the discussion in more detail. Lan SiZhui was curious, it seemed Jin Ling had been frustrated with his grandfather the moment they met, and he couldn’t understand what was the reason behind this.

Anyhow, once Sect Leader mentioned Lan SiZhui might have gone back to Gusu, Jin Ling wrote a letter addressed to him in the Cloud Recesses. He thought if the letter was caught, then the Wen would at least not look towards Meishan, but if it was not, then maybe Lan SiZhui received it.

He waited for an answer, but growing tired of sitting around, doing nothing, training occasionally with Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng when his injuries let him, he decided he would sneak out at night through the river to look for Lan SiZhui. He had just decided this, sitting on the docks, when Wei WuXian showed up. He asked:

“Still no news?”

“What news would I receive? Lan SiZhui isn’t stupid enough to go back to Gusu and put the Cloud Recesses in further danger. He would sooner go to Qishan.”

“Do you think that’s where he is?”

“If I had a clue where he might be, would I want to look for him?” Jin Ling was annoyed with Wei WuXian and didn’t want to talk to him. That’s when a guard called out that someone was approaching on sword and they’ve rushed to the reception hall to see if it was a familiar person. At the first sight of white clothes, Jin Ling thought it was Lan SiZhui at first, but had to realize this person was a little taller and held himself much more rigidly.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian called out on what Jin Ling described as ‘his annoying shrill voice’. Lan WangJi then saw them, nodding to Wei WuXian, but fixing his gaze on Jin Ling.

“Second Young Master Lan.” Jin Ling bowed to him, then asked: “Are you here with news of Lan SiZhui?”

Lan WangJi shook his head and said: “I thought you and him were together. I came to see if he was here with you.”

“Did you read my letter?” Jin Ling got angry, then clenched it when Lan WangJi simply said:

“No.”

Then, Jin Ling told Lan WangJi what had happened and he simply nodded. Jin Ling took offense to that, but the appearing Sect Leader Jiang made him swallow his words. After a few days, the planning began.

“We are joining forces with the Nie Sect to create an opposition to the Wen Sect.” Lan WangJi told them. “Knowing that Sect Leader Jiang had survived the attack is not only a great relief but a good opportunity as well.” He then proposed a joining of forces, of the major Sects working together to fight Wen RuoHan. They’ve debated this day and night until finally, Jiang FengMian agreed to this. Then, Lan WangJi proposed they go to the Cloud Recesses, to not only discuss this amongst Sect Heads, but so the Jiang Sect could reclaim their fugitives.

“Thirty-five junior disciples are waiting for their Sect Leader in Cloud Recesses.” Lan WangJi told them, which surprised the whole Jiang family.

“Thirty-five of our disciples are there? But how?”

“They all agree that a Lan, a Jin and a Jiang disciple sent them there on boats. They recognized the Jiang disciple as Song SuHai and are anxious to know if he’s alright.”

“He fell in the battle.” Jiang FengMian shook his head. “Or hides elsewhere that is unknown to me.” He then turned to Jin Ling and bowed to him in gratitude, which upset Jin Ling greatly.

“If you are so grateful, let me go and look for Lan SiZhui!” He said instead of a real answer. “He also saved those disciples, so he should be just as important!”

“Of course, we won’t let you go now!” Madam Yu told him then. Jin Ling was annoyed with her, but he couldn’t yell at her in front of so many people, so he kept his mouth shut. Surprisingly, it was Jiang Cheng who tried to stand up for him.



“But mother, Lan SiZhui helped in the battle of Lotus Pier and also risked his life to save you. The least we could do is not to leave him to his fate.”

“Many were lost in this battle, A-Cheng. Do you also want to look for Song SuHai?” Madam Yu asked him then. “Or Jiang Lue? How about the numerous other disciples we do not know the fate of? Wen SiZhui is not our concern.”

“He may not be of concern for your Sect, but Madam Yu, I am still not of your Sect.” Jin Ling told her and her gaze turned to him then.

“Look around you! Where are you hiding now? This is my Sect and you’re here, so you will obey my orders.”

“Why are you so reluctant to let me leave then? Just because you dislike Lan SiZhui? If I didn’t ask to look for him, would you let me go? If I said I’m going back to my Sect, would you let me?”

“I would know it’s a lie, like so many other words that leave your mouth, MouShi!”

“Can you believe she called me this?!” Jin Ling asked in the present, slamming his fist on the table. For some reason, this made Lan JingYi chuckle. “Why are you laughing?!”

“Ah, Young Mistress, I’m afraid this phrase caught on!” Lan JingYi laughed openly now. Jin Ling made a face.

“What do you mean?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused.

“Well, when I heard of the reclaiming of Lotus Pier, people spoke highly of a talented master who fought alongside the Jiang, MouShi!” Lan JingYi grinned. “They said this title belonged to a seasoned warrior who wears Jin clothes and wields a spiritual bow. Then, later I learned this was actually you they were talking about!”

“I’m seventeen!” Jin Ling protested. “And they have no right to use that name! Madam Yu called me that out of mockery. I’m not even a good tactician!”

“Ah, Young Mistress, you are quite the actor though! And you have a great mind for trouble.”

“Even my uncle didn’t get a title like this, and he was a spy in Wen RuoHan’s court!”

“Ah, Young Mistress, I truly don’t see your problem. It is quite the praise!”

“Stop calling me that and let me finish, so we can move on!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, then continued his tale:

After it was concluded Jin Ling wouldn’t go anywhere, followed by pitying gazes, they set out to the Cloud Recesses. Along the way, Jin Ling tried to flee once, but Madam Yu

reclaimed Zidian by then and caught him. Jin Ling had never felt the power of the weapon before, and now he felt more sympathetic towards Wei WuXian when Jiang Cheng used it on him in the future.

It was a horrible feeling, even if the weapon was not aiming to injure him just to capture him, it sent a feeling of being struck without it hurting in a concentrated area, it run through his muscles. Jin Ling described this feeling as when one was out in the storm in Lotus Pier and held their sword in their hands as a lightning struck. Not knowing what this meant, the two Lan just shrugged and prompted him to keep going.

They've arrived to the Cloud Recesses, and not being a Sect Leader or a Young Master, Jin Ling was not allowed on further discussions of the alliance of the major Sects. The Jiang reconnected with their rescued thirty-five disciples, and so Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian became busy. They spent all their time with the children and Jin Ling was left alone.

Coincidentally, Jiang YanLi was also brought to the Cloud Recesses and had nothing to do – her parents simply thought she would be safer here. Once, as Jin Ling was walking around aimlessly, he ran into her.

“Young Master Jin.” She bowed to him and he returned it, not knowing what to do or say. “I’m glad we’ve met now. I wanted to thank you for looking after my family while me and my brothers were unable to.” This show of gratitude made Jin Ling uncomfortable and he accepted it with a nod. “I am sorry about Lan SiZhui.”

“Don’t talk like he’s dead already.” Jin Ling said, already regretting his words, but Jiang YanLi smiled at him and nodded.

“You’re right. I’ve only met him a few times, but I’m sure he’s very capable.” Jin Ling, not knowing what to say, nodded dumbly. “Young Master Jin, I’ve noticed you also don’t have much to do.” Jiang YanLi said then.

“No, apparently, I’m now a prisoner.” Jin Ling said, annoyed. He wasn’t annoyed at her though and he hoped she knew this.

“My mother means well.” Here, Jin Ling almost tripped up and told her: ‘If I were in my own time, this would be a great offense towards my Sect and myself as the Sect Leader as well,’ but he caught himself in time.

“Still. I’m not a Jiang disciple, she had no right to use Zidian on me.” He said, then realized whom he was complaining to. “Ah, but I’m sure Lady Jiang isn’t interested in such matters.” At this, Jiang YanLi had a strange expression, but Jin Ling couldn’t tell what it meant.

“Girls don’t like when you tell them what they should be thinking or interested in.” Lan JingYi inserted. “She was probably mad. Since you haven’t seen many girls, I understand why you were confused though.”

“Watch your mouth!” Jin Ling glared. “Like you know so many girls! You’re already twenty, yet you still have no sweetheart.”

“Hey!” Lan JingYi frowned, offended. “I will tell you this, if I were to live here and now as twenty, I’d surely be interested in a beautiful girl I vowed to marry once.”

“Why aren’t you pursuing her then?” Jin Ling challenged with a lift of his eyebrows. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“I do not have nor the time, nor the means to court a girl right now, Young Mistress. We’re about to go to war. Who knows if we survive? Who knows if she does?”

“So, this is the only issue then?” Jin Ling hummed. “So, if the war is over and you both survive, would you court her?”

“Jin Ling, I don’t think—” Lan SiZhui began, but of course, Lan JingYi would never back down from such an open challenge.

“I’ll tell you now. If the war is over and we both survive, and if by then we don’t return to our time, I will pursue her.”

“What is her name anyways? Is she a real person or did you just say that out of spite?” Jin Ling frowned.

“Lan SiZhui had seen her. She is the girl from DengLong Palace I’ve told you about, remember? Her name is Han Yu.” Lan JingYi told Lan SiZhui, who tried to remember. He had hazy memories of that time, but he recalled the event, so he nodded.

“I remember. She had dimples and her fingers were long.”

“Why did you note her fingers of all things?” Jin Ling frowned at him.

“I noticed they would be good for playing the guqin.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“Anyhow, I have said it.” Lan JingYi told Jin Ling. “Are you satisfied now?”

“What do I care about your love life?” Jin Ling scoffed. “I just said it to see if you were lying.”

“Not everyone is MouShi, Young Mistress.”

“You—!” Jin Ling rose from his seat, his hand raised. Lan JingYi laughed at him.

“Ah, Jin Ling, please, continue your tale.” Lan SiZhui requested, wanting to divert the other’s attention from Lan JingYi, whom got a stern look from both of them. This did not dampen his spirits, if possible, he grinned wider.

“Ah, I have missed you while we were apart.” He said.

“I did not!” Jin Ling said with his nose turned up as he sat down. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes, but then gestured him to continue.

After Jin Ling told her that he didn’t think she was interested in these matters, Jiang YanLi bowed her head and said:

“My apologies Young Master Jin, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“How did you pry?” Jin Ling frowned at her. At that, she didn’t seem to know what to say. “Anyhow, I don’t want to keep you from your business.”

“I was just heading to the kitchens to make something for the Sect Leaders and my brothers. Father and the others had been at the discussion all day and my brothers had been playing with the kids.”

“I see. Then please, don’t let me keep you.” Jin Ling stepped aside and bowed to her. She smiled and with a bow in return, she left. After this, Jin Ling had tried to sneak out of the Cloud Recesses at night. He had his jade token he got from Lan SiZhui, and feeling like he would be more use in searching for him, he tried to escape.

Unfortunately, the guards at the gates noticed him and stopped him. They told him the Grandmaster Lan requested not to let him leave, and not wanting to injure the guards, Jin Ling reluctantly returned to his rooms, of course, not without an argument with the guards. They said he should settle this matter with Lan QiRen, so he decided to do that the next day.

For a few days after that, Lan QiRen still didn’t accept his request for audience, so Jin Ling tried to escape again. This went down in the same fashion as before. Another attempt later, he was finally received by the Grandmaster. As he walked into the room though, the sight that greeted him was not the one he expected, for Jiang FengMian, Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian were also present.

“What is this about?” Jin Ling asked.

“Jin Ling, sit, please.” Jiang FengMian requested. Once Jin Ling did so, Jiang FengMian proposed: “We have decided to take back Lotus Pier. The Lan had agreed to help out in numbers and MeishanYu is also to our aid. We’re lacking strong cultivators among our ranks and A-Cheng, A-Xian and Lan WangJi do not have their own swords. I hoped, since you have family ties in the Jiang Sect, you’d also help. You can say no and we will not be offended, but know that your aid would help a lot, with your bow.”

Then, Grandmaster Lan addressed him: “I’ve heard of this bow of yours. They say it can release spiritual energy. May I examine it?” He eyed the bow slung across Jin Ling’s back ‘like he was looking at a perfectly copied volume of the Lan rules’, Jin Ling described. Jin Ling let him study it much like Lan SiZhui had, then he inquired if it responded to everyone’s spiritual energy, or only his.

“Lan SiZhui had tried it, but he’s not a practiced archer. And his cousin did so as well, but his cultivation is low. Lan SiZhui said this matter needed to be studied further.” He offered the bow to Jiang Cheng and almost called him ‘uncle’. Jiang Cheng tried it out, but no spiritual energy left the string. Without asking, Wei WuXian also took it, but it remained a regular bow in his hand as well. Jin Ling noted smugly that Wei WuXian seemed somewhat disappointed by this.

“Peculiar.” Lan QiRen said. “Does it have a name?”

“I haven’t decided on one yet.” Jin Ling told him. This matter seemed closed, so Jin Ling asked Jiang FengMian: “Why would I help you, if you keep me as your prisoner?”

“Jin Ling, I understand that you want to find your friend, but I fear for your life. Wen Chao knows your face as well and since you’re closely associated with Lan SiZhui, his men probably also know it.”

“It is not your place to worry about me.” Jin Ling told him.

“Perhaps not.” Jiang FengMian agreed. “But you’ve saved my life and for that, I feel like I need to watch out for yours.”

“Repay me instead by letting me go and see this debt settled. I have a father, I don’t need another.”

“Last I heard, your father was dead.” Lan QiRen said and Jin Ling got angry. He didn’t think this was any of Lan QiRen’s business, but since he mentioned it, he felt like he had to say something.

“You know nothing about me. What would you know? But even if he’s dead, I do not need a replacement. I have enough of those as well.” Lan SiZhui assumed here he looked at Jiang Cheng.

“I apologize.” Jiang FengMian said after a minute. “I didn’t mean disrespect towards your family or yourself. If you help us, you’re free to look for Lan SiZhui, and I’m sure my son and A-Xian would even accompany you.”

“Of course.” Jiang Cheng said. “If I survive, I’ll help.”

“As will I.”

“WangJi will surely want to join as well.” Lan QiRen inserted.

“I don’t need their help.” Jin Ling said. “What if I don’t help in Lotus Pier? Am I free to go then, too?”

“Of course.” Jiang FengMian nodded and Jin Ling felt frustrated that he agreed so readily while in the past month he refused.

“Fine. I will help, but after that, I will not stay.”

“Of course.” Jiang FengMian agreed.

And so, they have marched to Lotus Pier. It took a day, as Wei WuXian described, and about a dozen of their own fell, but they’ve reclaimed the Jiang Sect’s home. Afterwards, just two days later, Wei WuXian proposed they go to the indoctrination office to retrieve their swords. Jin Ling thought this a good idea, so he went with them. There, they’ve met Jin ZiXuan, who briefly exchanged a few words with Jiang Cheng, but otherwise didn’t linger. Then, Lan WangJi said he was going to accompany Jin Ling in finding Lan SiZhui and at that, Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng also offered their help. Jin Ling didn’t care one way or another, so he decided to allow them.

“It’s not like I could say no to Lan WangJi or Jiang Cheng anyways.” He said, rolling his eyes. “We set out to go to YiLing next. On the way, Lan WangJi received a letter from his Sect, requesting his presence at home. He went home and we proceeded to YiLing, where we’ve asked around about whether anyone saw anything go down three months ago. Then one morning, Jiang Cheng told me Wei WuXian had gone missing. He didn’t seem bothered and told me: ‘He wanders off all the time. A few hours and he will be back’.

“Sure enough, an hour or so later he showed up, telling us he had some business to tend to in the woods, and if we needed him, we’ll find him at the camp where we’ve stopped on our way to YiLing. He brought a bunch of stuff away. Jiang Cheng thought he’d found a donkey and adopted it or something. We heard a jewelry seller say he recalls a young man being captured by the Wen, but he didn’t know where they took him. We’ve asked around all day until it turned into night and two Lan found us. Judging this to be a matter worth bothering Wei WuXian about we went to find him, that’s when we’ve met.” Jin Ling told Lan SiZhui, who nodded.

“SiZhui, what had happened to you then?” Lan JingYi looked at him with his eyebrows furrowed. Lan SiZhui sighed, knowing this time around, he couldn’t get out from answering. He looked down, collecting his thoughts, then began from where him and Jin Ling separated.

He told them about how he’d tried to avoid the guards in YiLing by going to the marketplace. He told them about having met Wen Chao then thinking he got away, only to turn around and find him waiting for him. He told them about the fight with Wen ZhuLiu, then Wen Chao’s threats. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling both looked more and more upset as he proceeded with the story, but they didn’t stop him.

When he got to the part when Wen Chao brought out Wen Ning, Jin Ling looked especially irritable, but he thankfully held his tongue and let Lan SiZhui tell his tale first. As he got to the part when Wen Chao had tossed him in the Burial Mounds though, Jin Ling’s fist slammed on the table, then he stood and turned around. Lan SiZhui stopped talking and looked over at Lan JingYi questioningly. He found the other looking at him.

“Why didn’t you just let them kill him?” Jin Ling asked, turning around, rage in his eyes.

“I couldn’t let them do that.” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“You’re not better off this way either!” Jin Ling told him. “Wen Ning is probably dead anyways, so what was the point?”

“Had you rather he told Wen Chao about where Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu were hiding?” Lan JingYi frowned up at Jin Ling as well.

“He could’ve lied and not told him where they actually were!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Ah, Young Mistress, remember, not everyone is MouShi.” Lan JingYi waved his hand dismissively.

“Would you stop?!” Jin Ling sat heavily. “Let’s just finish this story.” He said finally, looking away. Lan SiZhui, not wanting to upset him further, tried to explain the rest without going into too many details. In truth, he was still extremely worried about Jin Ling’s reaction to his demonic cultivation.

He tried to explain the most innocent way possible what method he’d been using. He stole glances at his friends to gather their reactions. While Jin Ling responded with how Lan SiZhui expected, being upset, Lan JingYi simply seemed thoughtful. Once he was done, he awaited their questions and judgement.

“Of course, this is what I should expect from the esteemed Lan SiZhui. You truly are the son of your adoptive fathers. You’re more like the two of them than you realize, you know that?” Jin Ling scoffed at Lan SiZhui. “Falling into the Burial Mounds without your spiritual powers, turning to demonic cultivation to make up for it, what is next? You’re going to create the Stygian Tiger Amulet?” Lan SiZhui looked down.

“It’s different.” Lan JingYi waved his hand in dismissal. “Wei WuXian had his spiritual powers. Lan SiZhui didn’t have a choice.”

“It’s not different at all.” Jin Ling scoffed. “You also sacrificed yourself for someone else and in the end, it barely even matters.” That made the other two pause and share a look.

“I thought Wei WuXian fell to the Burial Mounds because that was Wen Chao’s revenge on him for Xuanwu cave?” Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling watched him for a moment, as if trying to remember if he spilled a secret he didn’t mean or not, then he just changed the topic without further discussion.

“So, you’re the new YiLing Patriarch now?” He asked, looking Lan SiZhui up and down. “You look it.”

“Enough, Young Mistress.” Lan JingYi glared at him, but Lan SiZhui held up a hand.

“He’s right. Even though I have no desire to follow in the YiLing Patriarch’s footsteps, I think this might be our answer to the question how to defeat Wen RuoHan. Jin Ling, you remember that I wondered how it could be done before? Neither of us wanted Wei WuXian to turn into the YiLing Patriarch this time around.”

“Because this is so much better?!” Jin Ling jumped on his feet, shouting. It was a good thing they’d applied silencing charms earlier, or else it could’ve been heard from all the way in Cloud Recesses. “I’ve never wished Wei WuXian this fate, what makes you think I’m going to be happy about you taking his place? Demonic cultivation is dangerous, you’ve said it yourself. If it was so easy, everyone would do it!”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, to show he valued Jin Ling’s concerns and wasn’t trying to disregard them. “While that is true, a few people who had tried demonic cultivation had musical cultivation and I’m willing to chance saying none had studied the *Collection of Time* as much as I did either. Because of my knowledge of *Song of Winter* and *Spring Again*, I was able to figure out the old Qin language, which had proved to be extremely powerful when it comes to manipulating the spiritual energy around its user. I’m confident this might be the only safe use of demonic cultivation.”

“You don’t know for sure though.” Jin Ling glared. “For all you know, this is damaging you just as much as resentful energy damaged Wei WuXian.”

“That is true.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Which is why I’m not intending on using it too excessively. But don’t you agree this is our best weapon against Wen RuoHan?”

“Ah, before we talk about that,” Lan JingYi, who had been oddly quiet, cut in, “let me tell where I have been all this time and what happened. It... changes a few things, I believe.” He sighed. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look, then Jin Ling sat back down, his attention now fully on Lan JingYi, who sounded and looked oddly anxious.

His tale went like this:

After he and Lan XiChen had been sent away by Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui, Lan XiChen dragged him away from the barrier. They ran for a while without a real destination. When Lan JingYi questioned the Sect Leader where they were going, Lan XiChen wasn’t able to give him a straight answer. At first, it wasn’t obvious for Lan JingYi, but after the third day of this, he started to suspect Lan XiChen didn’t actually know.

“If you want, I know some people in Moling. They could hide us there.” He offered. Lan XiChen immediately dismissed the idea.

“If my brother and uncle failed to protect the Cloud Recesses, it’s best we don’t show in public.”

“Where could we go then, to hide?” Lan JingYi asked him.

“My mother was from a Sect in the south.” Lan XiChen brought up, just to disregard it moments later. “But I feel that would be as much of an obvious choice as Moling would be for you.”

“What about the Unclear Realm?”



“That would also be obvious, for it is well-known me and MingJue are in a good relation.”

After this, Lan JingYi didn't know where else he could offer them to go. He did not know where Lan XiChen had hid in the past and this meant he had no idea if his presence changed anything for these events. They kept traveling, though they had no destination. Soon, the excitement from the battle faded and they started thinking practically again.

“We need disguises to hide amongst villages.” Lan XiChen suggested.

“I'll go and buy some clothes.” Lan JingYi offered. Lan XiChen cautioned him to be careful. Lan JingYi even took off his forehead ribbon, in order not to be recognized and bought some simple clothes in a village not far from where they were camping.

After they've changed, they hired a room in a local inn and stayed for a few days. All the while, they tried to keep an ear out for news about their home. They heard that the Lan had lost the battle and that Grandmaster Lan had been injured. Lan XiChen was clearly anxious, but his orders said he was to hide away, so he couldn't go back.

They traveled aimlessly for a few more days when even Lan XiChen admitted they needed to find somewhere they could hide for an extended period of time. This was when they've heard Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui had been taken to Qishan for the indoctrination.

“I suppose, we could go there ourselves.” Lan JingYi suggested. It was mainly because he knew that next Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi were going to face the Tortoise of Slaughter and he was anxious that Lan SiZhui might get caught up in this plot as well. He never thought Lan XiChen would take it seriously.

“I agree.” Lan XiChen said. “Where better hide from the Wen than where they least expect to find us?”

And so, they've began their travel to Wen jurisdiction. It took them a few more days to get there. They did not go to Qishan, even they would not be so bold, but they settled in a village not far. At first, they just hired rooms in the local inn, then Lan JingYi became restless. Knowing the future was both a blessing and a curse and he was anxious to take action. Of course, Lan XiChen tried his best to talk him out this.

“I am scared for my brother as well. But at this time, it's too dangerous to reveal ourselves. It's best for them if we stay hidden as we were tasked.” He told Lan JingYi, but it didn't help much with his anxiety.

And so, he'd decided to look for something to do, or else he would've gone mad. In the end, the inn where they've stayed was looking for a waiter anyways. This kind of job was not below Lan JingYi, for he grew up closely associated with an inn as well. He quickly learned how to serve the guests.

Getting a job wasn't only good because it settled Lan JingYi, but Lan XiChen's wealth was notable. If they didn't appear to be struggling to pay for the rooms after a while, people would take notice. This way, Lan JingYi didn't ask for other payment from the owner of the inn than three meals a day and the price for the rooms.

Lan XiChen mainly remained in his own rooms, either meditating, cultivating, or he was reading some of those forbidden books. When Lan JingYi learned this, he involuntarily asked if *Collection of Time* was among them as well.

“You know that volume?” Lan XiChen asked him curiously. Lan JingYi was unsure how to answer.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui told me about it.” He said in the end. Lan XiChen just kept looking at him before he nodded. He told Lan JingYi:

“It is here. Do not worry.”

“I wasn’t worried.” Lan JingYi denied. “I was just curious. Anyhow, why are you studying them?”

“I have nothing better to do.” Lan XiChen answered him good-naturedly. Lan JingYi laughed at that answer.

“Before I tell you this next part, I must tell you, I have not spoken to Lan XiChen about the *Collection of Time* other than that conversation I just told you about.” Lan JingYi said, fidgeting. Jin Ling raised his eyebrows and Lan SiZhui furrowed his in confusion.

“Just ‘Lan XiChen’ now, is he?” Jin Ling asked, and belatedly, Lan SiZhui also realized this is how Lan JingYi referred to ZeWu-Jun. He peered at his friend curiously, whose cheeks reddened.

“We’ve just spent a lot of time alone, with only each other to talk to freely.” He rubbed the back of his head.

“Surely.” Jin Ling snorted.

“You’re the one to talk, MouShi?!” Lan JingYi glared defensively.

“Hey! Stop it, it will truly stick!” Jin Ling glared back.

“Good! I’ve tried to have Young Mistress to be stuck on you as well, but I keep too good company.” Lan JingYi grinned.

“Do you have a death wish?! I’ll break your legs!” Jin Ling glared back. At this, Lan JingYi threw his head back and laughed. Lan SiZhui shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips. He’d missed this bickering while Lan JingYi was away.

“JingYi, your story.” He reminded the other gently, once the two calmed down. Lan JingYi sobered up quickly from this, and sighed.

This is how their lives went for a few weeks. This was, until a familiar face appeared in the inn. This was actually at a time when Lan XiChen also decided to take his dinner in the common areas instead of his rooms. Lan JingYi was just finished with a table when this person walked in, and as soon as he saw him, he grew extremely anxious.

Of course, Jin GuangYao, at this time only Meng Yao, had also spotted Lan XiChen. As soon as their gazes met, Lan XiChen stood, mouth agape like he saw something relieving. Lan JingYi thought this very disturbing, knowing the two men's future. Meng Yao carefully made his way over and bowed to Lan XiChen, who actually asked him not to and even invited him to his table. Lan JingYi had to control himself as he went over to the table, to serve them a new round of tea.

"Ah, Lan JingYi, do you remember Meng Yao from the guest lectures?" Lan XiChen asked with a sickening smile. All Lan JingYi wanted to do was to yell out at Meng Yao, but he had learned to be subtle in these situations, so he just bowed to Meng Yao, who looked shocked that Lan XiChen addressed him so casually.

"Ah, my apologies, brother Lan, I didn't realize you were a Lan disciple in these clothes." Meng Yao said as he also stood and bowed.

"Of course." Lan JingYi told him. Seeing they wanted to converse in private, Lan JingYi put down the tea and left.

Meng Yao and Lan XiChen were talking for a while. It actually only ended when the owner of the inn told them they'd soon stop serving food, and so, Meng Yao stood, bowed to Lan XiChen again, who stopped him again, then Meng Yao left.

As soon as they were both free and back in their rooms, Lan JingYi rushed over to Lan XiChen's room and pounded on his door, anxious to tell them his truth. Lan XiChen let him inside, and so, Lan JingYi joined him at the table where Lan XiChen was having some tea.

"What is the matter, Lan JingYi? You seem tense." Lan XiChen told him.

"ZeWu-Jun, don't take this the wrong way, but you cannot trust Ji—Meng Yao." At this, Lan XiChen was confused. "He appears genuine and good-natured, but in reality, he is a mastermind who kills his enemies in cold blood and feels no sorry for those who are left behind. He covers up his crimes very well."

"I see. What evidence do you have for this claim?" Lan XiChen asked next and Lan JingYi couldn't actually bring up anything he could say. Meng Yao at this point had not yet started his more elaborate plans.

"ZeWu-Jun, please, trust me and listen to me." He asked in the end, not knowing what else to say. At this, Lan XiChen hummed thoughtfully.

"Did something happen because of Meng Yao the last time then?" Lan XiChen asked and without thinking, Lan JingYi agreed. It took him a moment to realize what was asked, and tried to cover up his slip-up:

“Uh, what do you mean ‘last time’, ZeWu-Jun?” He grew anxious at this, not knowing what to make of these words. Lan XiChen then looked up and smiled at him tiredly. At this, Lan JingYi’s unease grew even more.

“Lan JingYi, I might not question everything that is said to me, but I do listen.” Lan XiChen here gave him a significant look, and Lan JingYi had no choice but think through all he’d said to the Sect Leader since they’ve returned to the past.

He remembered telling him that first day his parents name. Then he remembered when they ran into each other in the library. He also remembered when Grandmaster and him cornered him about his parents right afterwards and sent him to Moling. He remembered, shortly after he’d returned, Lan SiZhui also talked to him. That was when they’ve thought Lan XiChen might’ve figured them out, and also when Lan XiChen read *Collection of Time*. After that, they’ve only talked briefly in the Grandmaster’s presence. Then there was that strange time when they were about to leave and Lan XiChen asked them to be patient until Grandmaster decided to let them go or not.

“Ah, I’m not sure what you mean, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan JingYi told him.

“Of course.” Lan XiChen agreed. “While your effort to keep this secret is admirable, you must work on your discretion.” He told Lan JingYi in good humor. “At first, I thought you and your friends, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling were spies from the Wen Sect. But then I had to realize this wasn’t true. You kept talking about events that had never happened. Then Lan SiZhui came to me with that strange question.” Here, he reached out and placed a book on the table. It took Lan JingYi a moment to realize what it was, but once he did, he felt his heart pounding frantically. He began sweating and his thoughts began rushing, thinking how could he do damage control.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, Lan SiZhui’s questions were just theoretical. He has some strange interests...”

At this, Lan XiChen looked extremely tired. “I see. Lan JingYi. You must know that Meng Yao had offered his help with this situation with the Wen. I am willing to take it. If you know a reason why I should not accept his help, then you better say it now. You say I should not trust him, but I cannot help but do, since he’d not done anything to me – yet.”

This, Lan JingYi recognized as a well set-up trap to make him confirm what he believed to be Lan XiChen’s theory. Instead of doing that, he asked:

“ZeWu-Jun, may I ask what you think I am keeping secret?” He almost didn’t even want to hear the answer!

“Well, of course, that you, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui are from the future. The song *Spring Again* brought you back.”

“He knows?!” Jin Ling jumped on his feet once again. “Lan JingYi, you were not supposed to tell anything!”

“I didn’t tell him! Would you sit down?!” Lan JingYi clicked his tongue, annoyed. Jin Ling huffed, but did as was told.

“How does he know then, if you didn’t tell him?!”

“If you would just listen, you would know.” Lan JingYi frowned at Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes at him.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, you must’ve misunderstood something! That is not true!” Lan JingYi denied vehemently.

“Then did Lan SiZhui tell the truth and he is really writing a book?” Lan XiChen looked skeptical.

“That’s what he told you?!” Lan JingYi asked. At this, Lan XiChen smiled.

“This is what he said, at least implied. If he didn’t bring up *Song of Winter* right afterwards, I might’ve truly believed it. Then I looked into the *Collection of Time* and I connected the dots. Your parents have no children, you all seem to know us well even though we’ve never before seen you. You’ve been acting strange and talking nonsense since you’ve arrived, but now I understand why.”

“He knew all this time and haven’t said anything?!” Jin Ling gaped. Then, he turned to Lan SiZhui angrily. “And must have you done that?!”

“Young Mistress, I’m afraid if you don’t stop interrupting, I might put a silencing charm on you.” At this, Jin Ling glared at Lan JingYi, but from that point on he remained quiet.

“But...” Lan JingYi did not know where to start. Should he confirm, since Lan XiChen already figured it out? Or should he keep denying? But what was the point? They were far from the Cloud Recesses, it wasn’t like Lan XiChen could kick him out now. Or could he? “You’ve known all this time and haven’t said anything?”

“When Lan SiZhui talked about this, he asked me what would I do if I was facing this dilemma. I’ve answered I’d remain a mere observer. I have not lied.”

“But if you didn’t want anything to be changed, wouldn’t you have forbidden us to change the past as well?” Lan JingYi asked.

“I have not interfered because I sensed you had no ill intent. I believe you did not come here to cause trouble.” Was Lan XiChen’s answer. “If I gave you this book, I must’ve had a good reason for it.” At this, Lan JingYi grew even more anxious. He wasn’t sure how he should tell Lan XiChen they had not come back on purpose, nor did they receive the book legally either.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, the truth is, us being here is actually an accident.” At this, Lan XiChen became confused. “We did not know what this song does, nor were we aware this had happened until I met my parents. We didn’t even use spiritual energy to play it knowingly. It just happened out of accident, because someone nearby cast a spell at the same moment we played the sheet.”

“I see.” Lan XiChen was then quiet for a long time and Lan JingYi was afraid of his reaction. “So far, I’ve believed it must’ve been a Sect elder who gave you the song to send you back. But if that is not the case, I’m afraid this changes everything.”

“What will you do now?” Lan JingYi asked, nervous.

“I am not sure.” Lan XiChen admitted. “I feel like it would be best if I knew what extent have you changed the past so far. But at the same time I’m afraid to learn.”

“It’s actually not much!” Lan JingYi told him. “Despite our efforts, everything is going as it had.”

“I see.” Lan XiChen said. “But now, you want to alter the course of events by telling me I should not trust Meng Yao?”

“Mn. ZeWu-Jun, Meng Yao is—” Lan JingYi wanted to tell him that he’d betrayed Lan XiChen and killed Nie MingJue, but Lan XiChen did not let him speak past the man’s name.

“I do not wish to know the events of the future.” He said. “For now, it is best if I think about what do I want to do knowing you’re not here under orders.”

“ZeWu-Jun, don’t you think that if we know what will happen, it is our responsibility to help?” Lan JingYi brought up.

“I believe I’m much conflicted on this matter.” Lan XiChen answered. “For now, let me think on this. We will talk tomorrow.” With this, Lan JingYi was dismissed.

The next day the two of them sat down to talk in Lan XiChen’s room again.

“I still do not wish to know more about the future,” Lan XiChen told Lan JingYi, “but I am willing to consider your warning. I believe the best course of action for now would be if we approached this issue with caution. You say I should not trust Meng Yao. While I believe his personality is rather mellow, I am willing to admit I do not know him well.”

“You won’t trust him then?” Lan JingYi was relieved.

“I think his proposal has potential. I need to talk to him to find out what he’s willing to help with. If I judge this would aid us, I will believe his best intentions. At the same time, I will not place my trust in him blindly. By how eager you are for me to keep my distance, I believe you are trying to prevent a tragedy from occurring.”

“If ZeWu-Jun wishes, I can help.” Lan JingYi said. “I might not know everything, but Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling know much about these times. They could also aid us greatly.”

“For now, I think the best would be if you’d keep looking out for things like the matter of Meng Yao in the future. Do not tell me what will happen, but if I need to be aware of something, it would be best if you let me know.”

“So... ZeWu-Jun wants me to be his advisor?” Lan JingYi asked and Lan XiChen agreed. Then, Lan XiChen wrote for Meng Yao to visit him soon, and they returned to their usual routine.

Meng Yao came by a few days later. Afterwards, Lan XiChen told Lan JingYi what they’ve discussed.

“Meng Yao is willing to join the Wen. As Nie MingJue’s disgraced subordinate, he would be a believable spy. From the inside, he could provide us information that would be crucial to the upcoming complications.”

“ZeWu-Jun, I’ve been wondering since I’ve learned of these times... Why can’t Meng Yao just get close enough to kill Wen RuoHan?”

“An army is unlike a snake. If you cut its head, the body will not die. As much as I dislike saying this, a war has to be won on the battlefield and not in the palace.”

“The war is inevitable then?” Lan JingYi asked next. Lan XiChen seemed saddened by the fact Lan JingYi said ‘*the* war’ and not just ‘*a* war’.

“The Wen Sect had attacked the Lan Sect, and I’ve heard people mention the Nie Sect as well. Even if the Lan Sect is willing to look past, Nie MingJue would surely want revenge. As close friends, I would be obliged to support him, if only morally.”

“ZeWu-Jun is aware of Wen RuoHan’s possession of the Yin Iron?” Lan JingYi asked.

“I am, and it concerns me greatly. There’s very little we know about this artefact and even less we can counter it with.”

Lan JingYi then wanted to tell him about the Stygian Tiger Amulet, but seeing that Lan XiChen only asked for his consul if something was necessary for him to know, he decided this wasn’t that kind of information.

“Lan JingYi, does Meng Yao betray us in his spying?” Lan XiChen asked then. Lan JingYi considered the question, then ended up shaking his head. Lan XiChen seemed pleased about that. “Then I can accept his offer.”

After they were done with this discussion, Meng Yao came by and him and Lan XiChen discussed the details. Then for a while nothing peculiar happened. Then all at once, they’ve received news of the guest disciples in Qishan going on a night hunt. Him and Lan XiChen both awaited news tensely. It was only a week or so later they’ve received word that everyone survived. This filled Lan XiChen and Lan JingYi with great relief. Despite him knowing the events, he couldn’t help but fear for his friends.

Another few weeks went by. Lan XiChen had decided a few weeks into their stay that Lan JingYi's education should not suffer these unfortunate circumstances and, Lan JingYi secretly suspected, he was also bored out of his mind, with only meditating and cultivating all day. Lan XiChen requested some volumes from Meng Yao, who was more than happy to provide them. From there on, after Lan JingYi was done in the inn, he would go up and study talismans and wards – as Lan XiChen had read his report on the Graveyard-Purging talisman and decided Lan JingYi was talented in such crafts. Lan JingYi had his doubts, but he could hardly argue with his Sect Leader.

Soon, news had reached them that the Cloud Recesses had been reclaimed. It happened about two weeks prior and Lan XiChen was not pleased he'd received the news so late. If that wasn't enough, only a day or two later they've also received news about the battle in Lotus Pier.

“Can you believe it?” A chatty patron told his tablemate. “Young Master Wen went there to retrieve the criminals Wei WuXian and Wen SiZhui, but the Jiang Sect actually defied them and even attacked Lady Wang!” At that time, Lan JingYi hadn't known that Lan SiZhui had been declared a criminal, so he was quite shocked. “Wen SiZhui had even wounded Young Master Wen rather badly. Then they fled with Sect Leader Jiang and the Madam Yu. Nobody knows where they are at this time.”

After this, Lan JingYi felt he knew what had happened by then, he calculated this must be when Wei WuXian fell into the Burial Mounds. He thought it was time to return to the Cloud Recesses, but at the same time he felt like they hadn't done enough to help out in Qishan.

“Meng Yao had already been accepted into the Wen court, yet you feel there's more to do?” Lan XiChen asked.

“I know ZeWu-Jun doesn't wish to know about the future, but everything is happening faster now than it did back then.” Lan JingYi told him. “I feel like our aid is needed.”

“And what would you do?” Lan XiChen asked him. At this, Lan JingYi thought for a while, then said:

“There's actually something we could do that would have a great impact in the war, yet very little to the course of events.” He said slowly, giving chance to Lan XiChen to stop him. The other man told him to continue. “Last time, it took a long time for Sect Leader Jin to join the ranks. I feel like if we go there now, the presence and direct approach of Sect Leader Lan might be enough to convince him. If we cannot, then there's also Jin ZiXuan, whom joined the war before his father had decided to do so.”

“You wish to go behind Jin GuangShan's back and seduce his son to lead his troops?” Lan XiChen was skeptical.

“I'm only saying if the Jin Sect joined the war sooner, then many battles would be won faster and with less victims.”

“Let us travel to Koi Tower then.” Lan XiChen said after thinking it through.



They set out a few days later, after also informing Meng Yao about their desire to leave. He needn't to know where they were going, but it was best he was informed of their departure. On the road, Lan XiChen inquired Lan JingYi about more personal matters.

"This had been on my mind since that scene on the introduction ceremony; just who were Jin Ling's parents that he reacted so badly?" Lan JingYi thought about answering, then shrugged.

"If ZeWu-Jun had been wondering since then, then surely, he can connect the dots." He was skeptical about Lan XiChen not having figured it out yet, and sure enough, at this, Lan XiChen nodded as if his theory had been confirmed.

"Isn't it going to anger him then, that we ask Jin ZiXuan to join the war?"

"I believe he would understand."

"Lan ChenGuang and Su ZhuoXuan are also dead in your time."

"There isn't much I can do about that." Lan JingYi admitted. "It is true I would be happy if they haven't died, but I have come to terms with their death a long time ago. My only regret is my parting words to them. My father tried to teach me a lesson at the time, but I was not listening."

After this, they did not talk much on their journey.

They've arrived to Lanling not long after. Jin GuangShan was actually delighted to see Lan XiChen and received him warmly.

"Sect Leader Lan, your absence had been greatly noticed!" He said when they were sat in the reception hall in Koi Tower. Lan JingYi felt uncomfortable and strange, not knowing Jin GuangShan well, he felt like his character was very much unlike Jin Ling's or even Jin GuangYao's. He smiled warmly at the two of them, yet Lan JingYi could sense some annoyance from him.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Jin." Lan XiChen answered. After some pleasantries, Lan XiChen introduced Lan JingYi. "This is my subordinate and confidant, Lan JingYi."

"Ah, a fine young man." Jin GuangShan nodded to him. Lan XiChen continued:

"He has a proposal that I believe Sect Leader Jin would find worthy to listen to." After Jin GuangShan confirmed he was willing to listen, Lan JingYi told him about the Lan Sect's plan to join forces against the Wen Sect. Jin GuangShan listened thoughtfully, then sighed.

"Sect Leader Lan, Lan JingYi, while this proposal is indeed notable, I do not feel going to war against the Wen Sect would be a good action to take."

"Sect Leader Jin doesn't think the Wen deserve more than a strongly worded letter for having your son almost killed?" Lan JingYi frowned.

"You are young, Lan JingYi, so I do not fault you for not understanding the art of diplomacy."

“It is not about diplomacy.” Lan JingYi disagreed. “While I see why Sect Leader Jin would not want to take revenge, then what about Wen RuoHan’s other plans?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Wen RuoHan is in possession of three shards of the Yin Iron now and who knows if he will find the fourth. If he does, then he will have more power than any other Sect. He will take over our world and make us his slaves.”

“You do not know that.” Jin GuangShan tried to placate him. “You’re much young and I understand the feeling of being inferior to everyone is much present at this age, but—”

“Sect Leader Jin,” Lan XiChen actually cut in, “Lan JingYi is my confidant, as I told you. He is someone whose word I trust and do not disregard. Please, hear him out.” At this, Lan JingYi was shocked that Lan XiChen protected him. This was more or less a declaration and Lan JingYi felt the weight of this responsibility for the first time on his shoulders.

“I apologize.” Jin GuangShan said. “But XiChen, you must understand my point as well. Wen RuoHan might have made questionable moves, but what proof do you have that he is possessing this Yin Iron and he is intending on overthrowing the major Sects?”

“Is he blind and deaf?!” Jin Ling slammed his hand on the table again. “Was his son not there for the indoctrination as well? Was he not also left to his fate in Xuanwu cave? I do not wonder anymore, why he was executed by my uncle.”

“Jin Ling, don’t say that.” Lan SiZhui frowned. “For me, it seems he is trying to avoid conflict. If you were in his place, would you not also want to avoid this?”

“There’s a difference between avoiding conflict and cowardliness. Sect Leader Jiang is also the type of person to avoid conflict, yet he has joined the war. And I am newly seated Sect Leader after a corrupt one. He is an established Sect Leader for over three decades now. Our circumstances are vastly different.”

“I agree.” Lan JingYi sighed. “Jin GuangShan does not mind sitting in the Wen’s shadow until it turns out they will lose.”

“So, what did you say?” Jin Ling asked.

After a day’s worth of arguing later, Lan JingYi finally concluded:

“If Sect Leader Jin had not realized this yet, I don’t think there’s anything I can say to convince him.”

Lan XiChen agreed. “Sect Leader Jin, while we’re thankful for your hospitality, do you mind not telling anyone that we’re here presently? We still don’t know if Wen Xu is looking for us or had given up since. It would be best if nobody knew about our presence.”

“Of course. I’ll have guest rooms prepared, and naturally, Sect Leader Lan and his confidant can stay as long as they like.”

They had indeed received rooms and stayed for a few days. Jin GuangShan made a point of having at least one meal with them while they were there. Lan JingYi found he did not mind the treatment he got as Lan XiChen’s confidant.

It was about a week later that Lan JingYi, who had been allowed to train with the Jin disciples, met with Jin ZiXuan. The Young Master had been also present in the library as Lan JingYi continued learning talismans and wards, as he’d found Lan XiChen was right and he had some talent for them.

“Young Master Jin.” Lan JingYi greeted Jin ZiXuan.

“Young Master Lan.” Jin ZiXuan greeted him as well.

“Ah, I actually meant to talk to you.” At this, Jin ZiXuan seemed confused. “I have heard you were the one to provide aid when Second Young Master Lan and Young Master Wei were stuck in that cave. I wanted to thank you.”

“It was my duty to help.”

“I was also wondering if this sense of duty extended to more than just the Xuanwu cave.”

“Young Master Lan?” Jin ZiXuan was confused.

“Young Master Jin, wouldn’t you agree that this situation with the Wen needs to be addressed?” Lan JingYi asked him, watching closely for reaction. Jin ZiXuan seemed to be deep in thought, then he agreed. “Your father doesn’t think so. I have tried to convince him to listen, but he refuses. He is content to let this matter go, but knowing your proud personality and your involvement in the indoctrination, I was wondering if you agree.”

“Sir, my father is Sect Leader. I am not.” Jin ZiXuan told him.

“That might be true, but this does not mean you cannot be of help.” Jin ZiXuan seemed to consider this.

“What do you mean?”

“Soon, Young Master Jiang and Second Young Master Lan will attack the Wen indoctrination office.” Lan JingYi told him. “I am unsure when. But I am sure that they could use the help.” Jin ZiXuan looked out into the courtyard through the open doors, deep in thought. Then, he nodded, and without a word, left the room. Lan JingYi felt this was a great victory, so he returned to his studies.

They have stayed until they heard of the reclaiming of the Lotus Pier, then decided to return to Cloud Recesses. When Jin GuangShan offered to give them some guards to protect them on their way, Lan JingYi shared a look with Lan XiChen, both thinking how hypocritical this is from the Jin Sect Leader.

“From there on, there’s not much to tell.” Lan JingYi said. “We’ve returned to the Cloud Recesses. Grandmaster Lan was beyond relieved to see us. When we arrived, there was reports waiting for Lan XiChen from Meng Yao. We’ve also learned about Lan WangJi’s steps he took to join the Sects against the Wen. Lan XiChen requested me to stay until everything was sorted out, then he dismissed me, telling me to bring you back.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui.

“So, this is how it is.” Jin Ling hummed thoughtfully. “Lan SiZhui had followed Wei WuXian to the dark path and Lan JingYi became intimate with Sect Leader Lan. Yet I’ve been cooped up with Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng and my grandparents, nursing my injury.”

“Must you word it like that?” Lan JingYi frowned. “Anyhow, there wasn’t much you could’ve done and you did plenty. Saving Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu is not something that even occurred to me and if this bow of yours is truly as powerful as they say, then I’d say this was not a waste of your time.”

“I agree with Lan JingYi.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Jin Ling rolled his eyes. He didn’t seem to care much about their opinion, not like this was anything new. Lan SiZhui smiled at the familiar atmosphere that surrounded them.

“Ah, anyhow.” Jin Ling pushed on his feet, stretching. “I’m sure I’ve heard Jiang Cheng asking about us, so we better get going.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi stood as well.

“I do wish we had more time to discuss everything that had been said.” Lan JingYi noted. At this, Jin Ling snorted.

“Lan JingYi, some things needn’t to be said. And we have plenty time.”

“Did you forget about the upcoming war?” Lan JingYi frowned at his friend.

“No, but you forgot about something.” Jin Ling pointed out. “Lan SiZhui will not be able to fight for a little while.” At this, Lan SiZhui’s heart raced and he was quick to deny.

“Ah, Jin Ling, it is not as bad. I couldn’t fly yesterday because I was tired. I feel much more refreshed now.” Even though that was completely true, Lan SiZhui noted his Golden Core was still struggling. Now, he felt like it was time to worry about his spiritual energies.

“I’m talking about the fall you took to the Burial Mounds. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how careful you are with your movements.” Jin Ling frowned at him. “What were you talking about? What’s wrong with your Golden Core?” At this, Lan JingYi also looked alarmed and he reached out, feeling Lan SiZhui’s pulse.

“I don’t know.” He admitted quietly. At this, Jin Ling glared at him.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Jin Ling's title: 谋士 MóuShì: "counselor/tactician/strategist/skilled manipulator"

## Righteousness II.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Let us go to the physician.” Jin Ling said. “This matter needs to be addressed.”

“Ah, Jin Ling, there’s really no need.” Lan SiZhui protested. “I just need a little more time, I’m sure.” Even though he didn’t really believe this, he couldn’t help but wanting to put his friend at ease. It felt wrong to have the two of them worry about him while they’ve been worrying all this time.

“This is not right. A doctor should see you.” Lan JingYi agreed. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“I have just escaped the Burial Mounds barely a day ago. My Golden Core had been extremely weak because of the Burial Mounds and I’ve also been injured. Do you remember how I fell into a coma after I’ve played *Inquiry* in there last time? It took me five days to recover. I just need a little more time. It’s not suitable to worry yet. Let us wait a little longer.”

At this, both his friends fell silent, watching him. Finally, Jin Ling sighed. “If you’re sure. Your other injuries should still be addressed though, so let’s still go to the physician and have them take a look. There’s no point refusing while we’re there anyways.”

“Will the Jiang doctor see me?” Lan SiZhui hesitated.

“Of course, they would. They treated me briefly after the battle here as well.” Jin Ling frowned. Lan SiZhui meant that Madam Yu was not happy with his presence and her dislike might not be unique to her, but he didn’t protest.

“First, we should see what Young Master Jiang wants.” Lan SiZhui said, also hearing the commotion outside as people discussed where they might be. They didn’t even have time to go out, the next moment there was a knock on the door. Jin Ling grunted, annoyed, and got rid of the silencing charm. Then, he went to the door to open it.

“What do you want?” He asked with an attitude. Lan SiZhui thought; when he said they should see what Jiang Cheng wanted, this was not what he meant.

“Ah, Jin Ling, I was just looking for the lot of you.” Came Wei WuXian’s voice from the doorway. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui joined Jin Ling at the door and Wei WuXian raised curious eyebrows at them. “So, you’re here. What are you discussing together in secret?” He grinned as if he was also in on some inner joke between them. Jin Ling shoved his shoulder, stepping out of the room.

“It’s none of your business. So noisy!”

“I was sent by Sect Leader Jiang to fetch you, why are you so rude?” Wei WuXian pouted. “Didn’t we become close lately?”

“Who got close to you?!” Jin Ling snapped. “I keep better company. If Sect Leader Jiang wants to see us, just say that and leave.”

“I will go with you.” Wei WuXian shrugged and gestured towards the main buildings. They set out then, Wei WuXian casting mysterious glances at Lan SiZhui. At the third time, Lan SiZhui met his eyes curiously. Wei WuXian smiled tightly at him, then turned forward and didn’t look back again. Lan SiZhui shared a look with Lan JingYi when he sensed the other looking his way.



They arrived to the reception hall only a few minutes later. There, Sect Leader Jiang, Madam Yu, Jiang Cheng and Lan WangJi were already present, drinking tea, waiting patiently. When they entered, the four of them were instructed to sit as well. Once they did, they were served tea. Then, Sect Leader Jiang spoke up:

“Lan SiZhui, A-Xian, please, tell us what had happened last night for you to capture Wen Chao.” Lan SiZhui shared a look with Wei WuXian as they both lowered their cups. Wei WuXian gestured him, allowing him to lead the storytelling.

“Sect Leader Jiang, Madam Yu, Second Young Master Lan, what happened last night was this: Young Master Wei and I were about to return to YiLing after a day of rest when Wen Chao stepped out from between the trees. When we parted in YiLing three months ago, Wen Chao had actually captured me. He proposed a deal: I either bring him the Yin Iron or tell him where Sect Leader and Madam Yu are hiding. When I was being difficult, he had called forth a guard who had captured Wen Ning. You might not have met him during our time in YiLing; he is Wen Qing’s younger brother with low cultivation. Naturally, I worried for his life for Wen Chao said if I don’t choose, he will kill him. I have chosen to bring him the Yin Iron.”

He paused, feeling embarrassed. “I was arrogant and thought it could be done. It turned out that was not the case and I was imprisoned for three months. It was when I could finally escape that I’ve met Young Master Wei.” He paused again, thinking carefully how to phrase his next words. “When Wen Chao appeared in the woods, he assumed I had the Yin Iron and so, he wanted to bully us to give it up. Naturally, we had to defend ourselves.”

“After we killed the first few guards, Wen Chao regrouped then intended to attack again.” Wei WuXian took over then and told them. “We defeated his remaining guards and while Lan SiZhui was in a battle with Wen ZhuLiu, Wen Chao and I also fought briefly – he is not a good swordsman you see, relying on his authority rather than his martial arts. I managed to best him and having him at sword point, we also forced Wen ZhuLiu to stand down.” He paused. “It’s because of this that we were able to capture Wen Chao. This was when Jiang Cheng and the others appeared.”

“I see.” Jiang FengMian hummed thoughtfully. “And is this true, Lan SiZhui, you know where the last shard is?”

“Sect Leader Jiang, whether I know or not, it is best if I do not say.” Lan SiZhui said, feeling guilty for not trusting anyone with this information.

“Nonsense!” Madam Yu snapped. “Wen SiZhui, do not keep secrets!”

“Madam Yu.” Surprisingly, it was Lan WangJi who spoke, and Lan SiZhui looked over, eyes wide. He was worried Lan WangJi would say something that would further anger Madam Yu, but it wasn’t like he could stop Hanguang-Jun from doing whatever he pleased. “Lan SiZhui is part of the Lan Sect, and his caretakers renamed him when he was taken in. Please, address him properly to avoid offending the Lan Sect.” This shocked Lan SiZhui. Of all people, Lan WangJi had the least reason to defend Lan SiZhui, and he felt a familiar ache in his heart. He longed for his adoptive father, but displays like this from his younger self were just as precious to him.

Silence descended on the room at once as Madam Yu glared at Lan WangJi, Zidian sparkling on her finger, but she did not say a word. Jiang FengMian waited a minute, then put a hand on hers and to Lan WangJi, he inclined his head.

“The Jiang Sect apologizes for any offense this might’ve caused.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded, turning back to his tea. Lan SiZhui’s heart felt faint and he lowered his head to avoid the looks and hide his smile. Lan JingYi pinched his thigh after a pause, and as Lan SiZhui looked up, saw that they’ve moved on from the topic, Jiang FengMian waiting patiently to address Lan SiZhui.

“Lan SiZhui, may I ask why are you reluctant to tell us if you even know the location or not?”

“Sect Leader Jiang, I mean no disrespect towards the Jiang Sect, but this knowledge makes a target out of everyone. It’s enough that Wen Chao just suspects I know the location and look how he chases me. It is best if nobody else knows, much less if they know for certain that a person has this knowledge.”

“It makes sense.” Wei WuXian nodded, turning to his Sect Leader. “Lan SiZhui is targeted by Wen Chao so fiercely, it’s best if we don’t give him more ground.”

“Wen Chao is imprisoned. What other harm could he do?” Jiang Cheng frowned at his brother.

“Of course, this matter is not this simple.” Jiang FengMian said. “Or do you think Wen RuoHan will just accept that we hold his son?”

“Father, you don’t mean we’ll have to return him?!” Jiang Cheng’s eyes widened.

“Negotiations must be made.” Jiang FengMian shook his head. “We cannot keep a Young Master imprisoned like this.”

“Uncle Jiang, didn’t the Wen also hold multiple Young Masters imprisoned during the Indoctrination?” Wei WuXian frowned. “This would be only giving back the same treatment



we've received.”

“A-Xian, do not hold resentment in your heart.” Jiang FengMian told him seriously. At this, Jin Ling startled everyone by snorting out loud. He immediately covered his mouth to muffle the sound. Lan JingYi elbowed him. Jin Ling waved his hand to signal not to pay him attention.

“Father, the Wen Sect held us for over a month during the indoctrination, left us to die in that cave and then attacked Lotus Pier without good reason. Holding Wen Chao is the least, he should be happy we did not execute him on the spot.” Jiang Cheng also argued.

“Boys, calm down. This matter should be addressed diplomatically. Or do you want to bring war to Lotus Pier for the third time?” Jiang FengMian raised his eyebrows at them.

“Why don't we listen to what the Lan Sect thinks of this?” Jin Ling spoke up unexpectedly. “They were wronged just as much as the Jiang Sect. This matter should not be entirely the Jiang Sect's business.”

“MouShi, what are you planning again?” Madam Yu huffed, annoyed. Instead of getting angry like Lan SiZhui expected, Jin Ling answered calmly.

“Violet Spider, I am merely pointing out the obvious. Lan SiZhui was also present when Wen Chao had been captured. The Lan Sect also deserves credit for this deed.” Lan SiZhui felt that Jin Ling was too level-headed, it was disorienting. And speaking to Madam Yu as if they were equals, Lan SiZhui shared a look with Lan JingYi – just what had happened between the two during the past months to prompt such blatant disrespect?

There was quiet in the room for a long moment. Jin Ling was ought to be scolded for his disrespect, but being from the Jin Sect, there was no one who was actually allowed to scold him. Then, Jiang FengMian said: “Young Jin Ling is right, of course. Second Young Master Lan, what is the Lan Sect's stand on this matter?”

Lan WangJi seemed thoughtful for a long time. It seemed like he would not speak when he started talking: “Wen Chao has important knowledge. If the war is to be fought, he might be more valuable as a prisoner.”

“How about retribution?” Jiang FengMian inquired.

“We will propose that Wen RuoHan gives up the war and his Yin Iron in exchange for his son's life.”

“That won't work.” Jiang Cheng scoffed. “Wen RuoHan would just send his troops over and kill all of us.”

“Now you're concerned with this?” Madam Yu shot a look at her son, who lowered his head in embarrassment.

“If we need information from Wen Chao, let's just ask him.” Jin Ling proposed. “Why let Wen RuoHan know we have him in the first place? As was said, no witnesses remained,

therefore nobody knows what had happened with him. We could even start a rumor saying he attempted to enter the Burial Mounds to get the last Yin Iron shard and died in there. Who could check if it was true?" He shrugged.

"And who would believe that Wen ZhuLiu also died in there?" Madam Yu clicked her tongue.

"More importantly, it is not Wen Chao's personality to see to these things personally. He would sooner send in an army than go to retrieve the Yin Iron himself." Lan SiZhui said, turning to Jin Ling and giving him his attention. "Even if he thought it was safe, at most he would send Wen ZhuLiu in first."

"Stop speaking like you know him at once." Jin Ling scoffed at him. "It is disturbing."

"SiZhui raises a good point, Young Mistress." Lan JingYi said with an apologetic look, also leaning closer to be part of the conversation.

"Then what is your proposal?" Jin Ling frowned at him, looking him up and down in distaste. This was a familiar look and Lan SiZhui had to smile at their usual antics. "Do you have a better idea?"

"We needn't to say anything." Lan JingYi told him like it was obvious. "It is enough to keep quiet and Wen RuoHan would not be wiser."

"Ah, you forget something." Lan SiZhui remembered at once. "We have left the corpses of the guards in the woods. If someone found them, they would know something went wrong." He didn't like to point out the mistakes in their plans, but this was also the best way they could plot.

"They're just guards; who would know they were with Wen Chao?" Jin Ling frowned, rolling his eyes at Lan SiZhui.

"I feel people ought to know Wen Chao's personal guards." Lan SiZhui told him.

"Ah, but how did the guards die?" Lan JingYi brightened with a new idea. "Would it be so far-fetched to say fierce corpses emerged and killed them, then chased away Wen ZhuLiu and Wen Chao?"

"Then why would they not have returned to YiLing or even Qishan?" Jin Ling rolled his eyes again.

"Maybe they were also killed somewhere in the woods. Nobody would be the wiser." Lan JingYi shrugged in indifference.

"Mn. While you raise a good point, people would search for their corpses." Lan SiZhui told Lan JingYi. "Wen Chao is not a common person to be forgotten. At least Wen RuoHan would demand their corpses to be brought back to be buried and confirmed they're truly dead."

"Then let's take their clothes and poke a few holes in them, scatter them in the woods." Jin Ling said after a moment of thinking.

“If I were the Wen, this wouldn’t convince me.” Lan JingYi said.

“Then let’s free them of a finger or two. To give us information, they do not need it.”

“Young Mistress, your violence had reached new levels.” Lan JingYi frowned at him. Jin Ling glared back.

“It’s not my violence, this just makes sense. If they need proof, we ought to give them proof.”

“You could’ve suggested we splatter blood around, yet your first thought was to cut off their fingers. I worry about you.” Lan JingYi teased, but real worry colored his tone.

“You!” Jin Ling hit him with his sleeve. “If I suggested that, Lan SiZhui would’ve just pointed out that would also not be enough proof. I merely saved him the energy to say.” He turned up his nose.

“How considerate of the Young Mistress. Truly courteous.”

“Who’s courteous?! I’ll break your legs!”

“Boys.” The three of them only now realized that while they talked, they forgot about the rest of the room. Now, they turned to Jiang FengMian somewhat embarrassed about having gotten lost in their own discussion.

“Look at you, MouShi. Who knew the three of you made such a good team?” Madam Yu frowned at them in distaste.

“This plan, could this work though?” Jiang Cheng asked. “Could you make it look like the two of them lost their lives in the woods?”

“A-Cheng, while I also like the thought of deceiving Wen RuoHan, harming the Young Master of the Wen, I am not in favor for this.” Jiang FengMian said.

“Why don’t we get some random corpses and burn them? Who would be able to tell the difference? Especially if we take and lay their swords there as well, it would convince people of their identity.” Wei WuXian thought out loud.

“A-Xian.” Jiang FengMian said sharply. “Whose corpse would you burn there then?” He glared at the boy, who looked taken aback by the stern tone. After a moment of thought though, his face reddened in embarrassment.

“I apologize, Sect Leader Jiang. I spoke carelessly.” He bowed and Jiang FengMian nodded.

“As long as you realize your mistake, you are forgiven.” He said. At this, a strange expression crossed Jiang Cheng’s face, but it was quickly gone.

“So, what should be done then?” Jin Ling asked, uncomfortable.

“Attempt the plan with only pig blood splattered around.” Lan WangJi spoke up. He looked over at Lan SiZhui. “Lan SiZhui and I will set out after dark to do this.” He told Jiang

FengMian, who seemed thoughtful, then nodded.

“It is not guaranteed this plan would work.” Jiang FengMian said. “But if we can buy some time with this, that is for the best.” He nodded, then addressed the room. “Let us break for lunch. I believe my daughter prepared some of her famous soup to these esteemed guests to eat.”

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Jiang YanLi was already waiting for them at the private dining hall where they were led, a huge pot in the middle of the table emitting steam through the cracks where the cover met the pot. Jiang YanLi bowed to her family and smiled at the guests.

“Brother Lan, it is good to see you in good health and to have you back. Brother Jin had been really anxious to find you.”

“Lady Jiang, it is good to see you again.” Lan SiZhui bowed.

“My children really carry your fate on their shoulders.” Jiang FengMian smiled. “As do I. We owe brother Lan for saving not just our lives, but Lotus Pier as well.” At this, Lan SiZhui turned red.

“Ah, Sect Leader Jiang, it’s really not a big deal. I merely did what anyone else would have in my situation.”

“Not everyone would have chosen to face their family instead of standing with them.” Jiang FengMian smiled sadly. At this, Madam Yu huffed, but didn’t say anything as they sat and warm, full-bodied soup was dispersed.

“Ah, right, Lan SiZhui, I meant to ask, why are you still wearing my clothes?” Wei WuXian asked. “Did Lan JingYi not borrow you any of his?” He raised his eyebrows at Lan JingYi, who turned red in embarrassment.

“It’s not that.” Lan SiZhui was quick to deflect. “It didn’t occur to me. I will change and return the robes as soon as I can.”

“Don’t mind that.” Wei WuXian waved a dismissive hand. “You can keep it. I think this color theme suits you anyways.” He smirked. “This is a nice change; the Lan always wear white clothes like they’re mourning.”

“They’re mourning their common sense to not wear light robes on night hunts.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. At this, Lan JingYi pointedly pinched Jin Ling’s golden Jin robes and tugged. “Hey! And don’t bring this up, dirt shows less on this color than on white.” Jin Ling pulled his clothes out from Lan JingYi’s hand.

“At least if our clothes are stolen, we do not also lose all our money from the amount of golden threads woven into them.” Lan JingYi said.

“You—!”

“Children.” Jiang FengMian chuckled. “Let us eat.”

The soup Jiang YanLi made was sweet and spicy at the same time and Lan SiZhui curiously found the taste familiar. He enjoyed it a lot. Jin Ling also seemed to savor his own portion of the soup, protectively curling his arm around it as he leaned down to spoon it in his mouth. One would think, looking at him, that he was afraid rabid dogs would take his bowl.

“What kind of soup is this, Lady Jiang?” Lan SiZhui asked curiously.

“Lotus root and pork ribs. Is it to your liking?” She asked with a worried expression. Not meaning to make her think he disliked the soup, he smiled at her.

“It is very good. I was just wondering where have I tasted it before, it is very familiar.”

“I have sampled countless versions of this soup.” Wei WuXian chimed in. “I am confident to say my sister’s usage of spices is very unique and couldn’t be copied.”

“Strange, when you were previously in Lotus Pier you haven’t eaten it.” Jiang Cheng also said with a thoughtful expression. “I wonder if it just reminds you of something else.”

“Perhaps.” Lan SiZhui shrugged. “Still, I find it very pleasing. Thanks to Lady Jiang for the trouble.”

“How do you like it, Young Mistress?” Lan JingYi asked with laughter in his voice. As they looked over, everyone saw Jin Ling pouring himself a second bowl. The boy’s face turned red in embarrassment at being caught acting so childishly, trying to pour himself more soup behind their back.

“I am very glad that brother Jin enjoys the soup.” Jiang YanLi smiled brightly at Jin Ling, who nodded. He cleared his throat.

“It is very nice, Lady Jiang, thanks for the trouble.” With that, he lowered his head once again, getting lost in eating.

“Excuse him, he doesn’t have any manners.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“It’s because my mother is dead, naturally I grew up with my uncles.” Jin Ling grumbled. “Don’t bring this up.”

“Ah, I didn’t know that, brother Jin.” Jiang YanLi bowed her head.

“How would you know?” Jin Ling looked away. “It seems here nobody knows anything about me.” At this, Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure if Jin Ling meant this positively or negatively. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a curious glance over his head, then they also returned to their soup.

“Do you like it, Lan Zhan?” Wei WuXian asked Lan WangJi, who ate much more moderately than the others. He hummed, then said:

“No talking during meals.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi immediately felt bad for speaking, especially Lan SiZhui, who started the discussion.

“Still, Lan Zhan, you must praise the cook.” Wei WuXian nudged him with his elbow.

“Mn. It is good.” Lan WangJi said, then pushed Wei WuXian’s bowl in front of him. “Eat. Do not talk.”

“Lan Zhan, this is Lotus Pier. Must you follow the rules here as well?” Wei WuXian pouted.

“A-Xian, let Second Young Master Lan eat in peace.” Jiang FengMian said, smiling at the boy. Wei WuXian rolled his eyes affectionately, but also returned to his soup.

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After they’ve finished lunch, Jiang FengMian had retired to take care of some urgent Sect business.

“A-Xian, A-Cheng, why don’t you show the guests around our Lotus Pier?” He asked as they walked out of the dining hall together. “I’m sure they’d appreciate a tour.”

“Ah, that’s right!” Wei WuXian brightened. “I’ve promised Lan Zhan that if he ever comes to Lotus Pier, I’ll show him my favorite places.” He grinned at Lan WangJi widely. At this, the Second Young Master of Lan simply nodded, indifferent. Jiang FengMian smiled at them.

“Good. I’m glad you have the opportunity to keep to your promise.” He got a sad look as he looked around them, and Lan SiZhui was sure he was thinking of all those they’ve lost. He quickly shook off his mood and turned to Lan WangJi. “Second Young Master Lan, then as discussed, you and Lan SiZhui will go to YiLing tonight. Let us know if you need anything other than the discussed items for your journey. Perhaps A-Cheng or A-Xian could go with you to help out?”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi shook his head. “The less people coming the better.”

“As you wish. Then please, be careful.” They bowed in goodbye, then Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu left. Wei WuXian turned to Lan WangJi.

“Lan Zhan, let’s go then.”

“I am not going.” Jiang Cheng chimed in. “I need some time to digest. Sister’s soup was especially delicious today.” He praised, looking at Jiang YanLi behind them, who smiled warmly at him.

“We’re not going either.” Jin Ling stated confidently. At this, curious glances were cast their way. “We have business to take care of.”

“And what would that be?” Lan JingYi frowned. “I’ve only been to Lotus Pier once, and that was also when your uncle—” He trailed off, glancing over at the others. “I’ve never seen Lotus Pier before. Why can’t I go?”

“Didn’t we just discuss we’ll take Lan SiZhui to the doctor after we’ve seen to our business with Sect Leader Jiang?” Jin Ling told him with raised eyebrows.

“Ah, right.” Lan JingYi glanced at Lan SiZhui apologetically.

“Lan SiZhui is injured?” Wei WuXian looked at them with wide eyes. The others also looked startled by this.

“It’s not like that.” Lan SiZhui was quick to correct. “Jin Ling is just being cautious. I have not been well-cared for these past months.”

“We’ve noticed.” Jiang Cheng frowned at him. “Did you even eat during this time?” Lan SiZhui looked away, pressing his lips together. He didn’t notice how much weight he lost, but according to his diet, he must not look well.

“Anyways, he should be looked at.” Jin Ling said. “So that’s where we’re going now.”

“Do you need us to go with?” Wei WuXian asked, face mirroring worry.

“What for?” Jin Ling asked back, irritated. “We know the way and your doctor knows what they’re doing. Me and Lan JingYi are going as it is, you coming would be too much.”

“Alright.” Wei WuXian nodded, not phased by Jin Ling’s tone – Lan SiZhui suspected he got used to it since Lan SiZhui last saw them together. “Let us know how you’re doing, SiZhui.” He smiled at the other.

“What are you calling him SiZhui for?” Jin Ling cast him a glare. “You are not familiar.”

“Jin Ling, you’re so hostile.” Wei WuXian shook his head, as if disappointed. “How will you marry with this personality?”

“Who wants to marry?!”

“Alright, we’ve wasted enough time.” Lan JingYi chimed in. “Fetch us if anything else comes up.” With that, he took hold of Jin Ling’s arm and tugged him. Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but obediently followed. Lan SiZhui bowed to the Jiang children and Lan WangJi, then followed.

“Why am I the one being scolded? He is the one who acts like we’re so close!” Jin Ling complained.

“Young Mistress, you forget we’re not in our time again.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “This behavior is not suitable anymore.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child!” Jin Ling snapped, glaring at Lan JingYi.

“Please, stop fighting.” Lan SiZhui sighed, feeling fatigued again. Their bickering, while it was familiar and comforting in a way, was also tiresome.

“It’s MouShi, who can’t take criticism.”

“Call me that one more time—!” Jin Ling snapped, glaring at Lan JingYi. Lan SiZhui shook his head, but didn’t say anymore.

“Why are you so mad? You should be proud. You’ve gained a reputation at such a young age, even your father hadn’t been able to do so.”

“Stop talking about my father. You don’t know anything about him.” Jin Ling glared angrily this time, and Lan SiZhui also felt like Lan JingYi was dancing on a fine edge.

“I’ve met him, remember? He is a cold person, but his personality isn’t bad. After all, once I’ve asked, he helped out eagerly during the siege of the Indoctrination office.” He shrugged. At this, Jin Ling quieted down noticeably and Lan SiZhui was worried Lan JingYi really did go too far this time. But Jin Ling didn’t seem mad, more thoughtful than anything, so Lan SiZhui let the matter go.

Jin Ling led them to the doctor, where they met several people walking around, tending to people in bed. One of them stopped to look at them, then notified someone else that new patients arrived.

“Brother Jin, are your injuries causing problems?” An older person stepped up to them.

“It’s not me this time.” Jin Ling said, annoyed. “This is Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui.”

“Brothers.” The doctor bowed to them and they returned it. “I am Hua Qing. What can I help with?” The three of them shared a look, Jin Ling’s and Lan JingYi’s encouraging him, probably to tell the physician about his Golden Core. Not wanting to tell, Lan SiZhui stepped forward.

“About three months ago, I was tossed from a sword from high up. I think my arm had been broken and some ribs as well. It still aches, but it is not as bad as it had been.”

“Have this injury been treated?” The doctor asked.

“Ah, there was no opportunity.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “And... For other reasons, my Golden Core is also weak, so it could not heal my injuries.”

“I see.” The doctor nodded thoughtfully. “I will examine you then.” They led Lan SiZhui to a room to the side, instructing Jin Ling and Lan JingYi to wait outside. As they treated Lan SiZhui’s ribs and arm, they were quiet and efficient. Then they checked Lan SiZhui’s meridians and finally spoke up: “Your Golden Core is indeed weak.”

“Can you tell the reason?” Lan SiZhui asked, somewhat apprehensive to hear the answer.

“Without knowing why is it this way, I do not dare to say.” The doctor shook their head. “But I also recommend brother Lan to cleanse his spirit, for you are also carrying some resentful energy. It could be another reason to why your Golden Core is struggling.”

Lan SiZhui nodded in acknowledgement. He had already planned on meditating in the Cold Springs once he returned home, and this was just another reason to do so. After his treatment was done, he drank three tinctures, one for pain, one to help the healing and one to strengthen



his Golden Core. Fortunately, his arm and ribs did not mend badly. The doctor said there might be some discomfort, for his ribs were not completely healed, but he should be able to use his arm. They recommended Lan SiZhui to do some exercises to help with stiffness. They also told him that he suffered a head injury and it would be best if he kept a low profile for a few weeks to allow it to heal completely.

Once Lan SiZhui emerged, he found Lan JingYi and Jin Ling sitting at a bench with one of the nurses, who was instructing them how to crush some herbs. He repressed a grin as he watched his friends concentrate. They were probably under foot and the nurse got fed up and gave them a task so they would at least be useful. Once he announced his presence, Jin Ling was quick to give up said task, but Lan JingYi hesitated until the nurse laughed at him and released him.

“So?” Jin Ling asked once they said their goodbyes and stepped out. Lan SiZhui smiled at his concern.

“The doctor said I am mostly fine. Some lingering injuries and stiffness as expected.”

“And your Core?” Lan JingYi asked next. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“They could not say.” He said. “Let us return to our rooms to rest.”

“I’m not tired.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. At this, Lan JingYi huffed.

“But Lan SiZhui is. Let’s just go.”

“Fine.” Jin Ling grumbled.

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Late afternoon came, the sky already darkening; it was wintertime after all, even if Lotus Pier’s temperatures were always higher than the Cloud Recesses’. Lan SiZhui gathered his swords and guqin, Feixu slung across his back, Yingjiu resting on his belt. Even if he could not use them as effectively, it was better to have them on his person.

Before they departed, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling also visited him in his rooms.

“Why are you going? You’re injured.” Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed.

“I think Hanguang-Jun wants to talk to him alone, that’s why he requested Lan SiZhui to go with him.” Lan JingYi said.

“You think that based on what?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Lan JingYi, you forgot again that he’s not your Hanguang-Jun?”

“Don’t be like that.” Lan JingYi glared. “Hadn’t you seen the glances he sent Lan SiZhui since they’ve reunited in the forest? He wants to address Lan SiZhui’s demonic cultivation, but he’s clearly waiting for an appropriate time to do so.”

“Maybe he just thought it would benefit him to have someone there who could control resentful energy.” Jin Ling argued. “It’s smart. I’d do the same. We want this to look like Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu had been torn apart by resentful energy and fierce corpses and if they could get some real fierce corpses and lingering resentful energy to further better the evidence, that’s what they should do.”

“It’s funny, how you dislike your title MouShi, yet you live up to it peculiarly.” Lan JingYi noted, and Lan SiZhui had to agree with that statement. Jin Ling didn’t get angry this time, just rolled his eyes.

“My family is apparently full of scheming people, except my father and my mother’s family. Naturally, I’m good at it. That doesn’t mean I am fond of people comparing me to Jin GuangYao.”

“Who compares you to him?” Lan JingYi frowned. “They don’t even know who he is yet.”

“But the three of us do and that is enough.” Jin Ling answered angrily. This made sense and Lan SiZhui wondered if he truly took the title in this context. If so, his apprehension was understandable. Jin Ling was raised by Jin GuangYao and in the light of the future events, Lan SiZhui saw how this would bother him. At the same time, he wished Jin Ling didn’t think this way, but instead acknowledge that many spoke the title as a praise – including Lan JingYi. “Whatever. I still don’t think Lan SiZhui should go alone with Hanguang-Jun. He’s not healed completely.”

“I’m well enough.” Lan SiZhui answered honestly. It was true, if Lan WangJi didn’t require him to use spiritual energy, there shouldn’t have been an issue. “We will just plant the evidence and leave. It is not a big deal.” He smiled. “There’s really no need to worry. By midnight, we will be back.”

“Not to worry?! You said the same last time and you went missing for three months.” Jin Ling glared. “Don’t make promises you cannot keep.” He said angrily, then with a flick of his sleeves, he turned out of the room. Looking after him cluelessly, Lan SiZhui shared a look with Lan JingYi, who could only shrug.

“He is right. Even though you will have Hanguang-Jun with you, you should be careful.” Lan JingYi told him.

“Mn.”



Lan SiZhui met Lan WangJi at the main courtyard, where the other man was conversing with Wei WuXian and Jiang FengMian. As Lan SiZhui arrived, they paused and greeted him.

“This shouldn’t take long, so we will be on the lookout for your return. Here.” Jiang FengMian handed over some signal flares and Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui both put it away. “In case something goes wrong, do not hesitate to use it. We have just got Lan SiZhui back.” He smiled, and Lan SiZhui bowed in thanks.

“I’ll stay up to wait for you.” Wei WuXian told Lan WangJi with a grin, who looked at him with an indifferent expression, but being as familiar with him as Lan SiZhui was, he recognized a pleased glint in his eyes.

“Not necessary.” He answered. Wei WuXian just grinned wider at that.

“I will. And then I will make you drink that wine I got from that old man today.”

“Will not drink it.” Lan WangJi told him.

“A-Xian, let’s let them go now.” Jiang FengMian shook his head, an affectionate smile playing on his lips. Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui bowed to them, then Lan SiZhui had to be carried on Bichen.



“Here should be good.” Lan SiZhui said as they arrived above the woods where they battled with Wen Chao. Lan WangJi landed with Bichen and they found the spot where the other Wen soldiers died. They were not moved, so Lan SiZhui suspected nobody had seen the bodies yet. He itched to have them buried, but knew it was for the best to leave them there.

“We should go a distance to make it look like they’ve fought a lot.” Lan WangJi suggested. Lan SiZhui agreed and they started their hike through the woods.

The forest was dark around them. The only sounds were their footsteps on the frozen tree leaves and occasionally the hooting of an owl. It could almost be called peaceful, as the faint light from the sky penetrated between the bare branches above them, how the night air was frosty. It smelled like cold air and earth. Lan SiZhui felt some lingering resentful energy from the ground, but it was so faint, it was barely notable.

He walked alongside Lan WangJi peacefully, awaiting something from the other man, to see whether Lan JingYi or Jin Ling were right about his intentions. In the end, he couldn’t bear it anymore, he had to ask:

“Second Young Master Lan, may I ask something?”

“Mn.”

“Why did you choose to bring me?” Lan SiZhui was anxious about the answer. While he didn’t intend on hiding his demonic cultivation nor the reasons for it from him, he knew Lan WangJi was also not in favor of these methods. If he choose to discuss it, Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure what his reaction would be. Would he accept it easily like Lan JingYi? Be upset like Jin Ling? Be puzzled like Wei WuXian?

“Quiet.” Lan SiZhui was confused. “The others are... noisy.” Lan SiZhui almost broke into laughter at that.

“I see.” He answered, repressing a smile. “I thought you might want a more convincing evidence or discuss something in private. If that’s not the case, then I’ll also not talk.”

“Mn.” There was quiet for a while as they were looking for an appropriate spot. Then, after a few minutes, Lan WangJi spoke up again: “Resentful energy corrupts the body and mind.” He startled Lan SiZhui with his voice so unexpectedly. Lan SiZhui blinked, hesitating to answer. “It is not safe to use such methods.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. He did not know what to say to that; he was very well aware of the dangers, but it wasn’t like he could tell Lan WangJi that. There was a pause, then Lan WangJi spoke again:

“For one to reach for such methods...” He trailed off.

“Second Young Master Lan, I didn’t mean to use this method either, but I had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice.” Lan WangJi said sternly. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to say to that. “The doctor, what did they say?” Lan WangJi asked after a long pause. When Lan SiZhui relayed the diagnosis, he nodded. There was a long pause, then Lan WangJi asked: “These past three months, where have you been?”

“Ah, I said already Second Young Master Lan, I was captured by Wen Chao.”

“You haven’t been with him this whole time.” Lan WangJi shook his head. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“Wen Chao actually believed me that time I said the fourth shard was in the Burial Mounds. He threatened Wen Ning, saying he kills him if I don’t bring him the shard or the Jiang Sect Leaders.”

“You choose the shard.”

“Mn.”

“So, he sent you to the Burial Mounds.” Lan WangJi looked at him sharply, at least from what Lan SiZhui could make out of his face, it looked so. Lan SiZhui didn’t answer. Lan WangJi didn’t need him to, he took Lan SiZhui’s wrist, feeling his pulse and examining his meridians. Lan SiZhui patiently let him, knowing refusing would just look bad. Once Lan WangJi let go, he looked at Lan SiZhui expectantly, waiting for explanation.

“There was no other way.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“We were coming.” Lan WangJi answered, equally as quiet.

“And who would’ve guessed where I was?” Lan SiZhui sighed. “Besides, at that point I’ve spent months in there. I did not wish to wait even more. Don’t take offense, Second Young Master Lan, but I thought I was on my own. I needed a way out and this was my only option.”

“I see.” He said thoughtfully.

“Technically, I am not in direct contact with the resentful energy. I use the old Qin language to control the energy.” Lan SiZhui tried to reassure, but from the response, he suspected he

archived the opposite.

“Musical cultivation should not be used in such way.”

“Yes, Second Young Master Lan.”

There was a pause, then unexpectedly, Lan WangJi said: “Here is good.” And Lan SiZhui remembered why they came. They pulled out the outer robes the Jiang had taken off Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu and also pulled out the jar of pig blood they’ve carried. They set up the scene, splattering the blood on the clothes and the ground. Once they decided it was good enough, they stepped back to examine their work. Lan SiZhui felt it was too staged.

“Second Young Master Lan, should I call forth fierce corpses and some resentful energy to deceive those who will find these even better?”

There was a long pause, then at the end, Lan WangJi quietly agreed and stepped back. Lan SiZhui pulled out Hudie then and played a few notes. Soon, moaning and groaning, two fierce corpses emerged from the ground near them, inspiring Lan SiZhui for something. He got out the jar of remaining blood and instructed the corpses to take it. This was not a command he was practiced in, so he struggled with the phrasing. It took a while until the fierce corpses understood his will and dragged the blood underground where they returned to, purposefully soaking the ground around the holes to make it look like they dragged the bodies away.

Once this was done, Lan SiZhui did not clear the surrounding area from resentful energy like he would usually, just backed away carefully. Once he was out of the range of the resentful energy, his gaze met Lan WangJi’s where he saw conflict, apprehension and approval as well.

Lan WangJi nodded and that was that.

Before they left though, Lan WangJi paused and turned to Lan SiZhui: “When we return to the Cloud Recesses, will you leave demonic cultivation behind?” Lan SiZhui paused, hesitating. He could tell the truth and reveal to Lan WangJi that he very much intended to use it against Wen RuoHan, but he knew in between now and then, he would not use it. There was no need to tell Lan WangJi about his plans, after all, he would just disapprove and discourage him. But Lan WangJi did not know what Lan SiZhui did, which was that without demonic cultivation, it took thousands of lives to defeat Wen RuoHan.

“Mn.” He nodded in the end. Lan WangJi regarded him for a minute, then nodded and they hopped on Bichen, returning to Lotus Pier.

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“You arrived late last night.” Jin Ling mentioned the next morning as him, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui were having breakfast in his rooms.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Hanguang-Jun and I made sure to cover our tracks, so it took a little longer.”

“Did it go alright then?” Lan JingYi asked, taking a long drink from some water that had been prepared with their breakfast. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“And who was right?” Jin Ling asked, raising his eyebrows. “Me or JingYi?”

“Neither.” Lan SiZhui told them before Lan JingYi could insert a comment, which he’d seen the other was prepared to do already.

“Ah, well, at least JingYi didn’t win.” Jin Ling sighed.

“That’s all that matters?” Lan JingYi frowned at him.

“Of course.” Jin Ling shrugged. “What else?”

“You’re unbelievable, MouShi.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stop calling me that already?” Jin Ling glared, but Lan JingYi just shrugged. Jin Ling rolled his eyes and turned back to his bowl. “Anyways, I don’t have the energy to deal with you right now.”

Before Lan JingYi could reply, there was a knock on the door. Jin Ling put down his tea and glared at the door, as if contemplating whether to open it. In the end, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Finding his temper unusually mellow, Lan SiZhui studied the other boy and noticed dark circles under his eyes that were usually not there. Thinking he might’ve lost sleep because he stayed up worrying about Lan SiZhui’s return, he felt bad.

“Come in!” Jin Ling called out, watching the door with an annoyed expression. It was a servant, bowing deep for them. “What is it?” Jin Ling asked.

“Young Masters, excuse me for the intrusion. Sect Leader Jiang wishes to see the three of you in the reception hall.” The servant told them.

“Right away?” Jin Ling huffed.

“As soon as possible.” The servant nodded. Jin Ling returned it, then waved his hand dismissively. The servant bowed again and closed the door.

“What do you think this is about?” Lan JingYi thought out loud, looking after the servant with a thoughtful expression.

“What else would it be about?” Jin Ling huffed. “I’m sure it’s about Wen Chao.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded in agreement. “Sect Leader Jiang haven’t said yet what he wants to do about him.”

“Let us go then, see what is the decision.” Lan JingYi said with a serious expression and the others agreed. They quickly finished their breakfast then set off to go to the reception hall. Once there, everyone was already waiting there.

“Boys, come, sit. This will be quick.” Jiang FengMian said and the three of them sat next to Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng. “This morning I’ve received a message from the Cloud Recesses. Sect Leader Lan heard you’ve returned to the Lotus Pier and expressed his desire to see you as soon as possible, Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui felt embarrassed being called out in front of so many people and felt his face heat. He nodded, signing he understood. “Because of this, I came to the decision to go to the Cloud Recesses myself as well. After all, we have an alliance against the Wen Sect and having Wen Chao in our possession affects all of us. It is best if we bring him there and question him together.

“A-Xian, A-Cheng.” He paused, visibly unhappy with whatever he was going to say next. “As your caretaker, it is my top priority to keep you safe. However, you’ve been doing a remarkable job these past few months. If you wish, you may also come with. I understand if you’d rather stay and look after Lotus Pier, more so, I’d feel better if you stayed.”

Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng shared a look, then as one, turned to Jiang FengMian. “We’d like to go, Sect Leader Jiang.” Wei WuXian said.

“As I thought.” Jiang FengMian smiled, but it was tense and tight. Lan SiZhui suspected Madam Yu also had a hand in this matter as well. “Then we will leave tomorrow morning right after breakfast. Please, all of you be ready by then.”

The gathered crowd at this all stood and bowed, then they left the reception hall together.

“Well, that is unexpected.” Jin Ling said.

“Not so much if you think about it.” Lan JingYi said. “Sect Leader Jiang is right. Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu have information that is crucial for the war. If the Sects share this information with each other, this will aid them even more.”

“Perhaps, but why go to Cloud Recesses for this?” Jin Ling frowned. “Couldn’t this information be shared in a letter?”

“You just don’t want to go there because it’s cold there now.” Lan JingYi teased.

“Not all of us grew up swimming in frozen lakes.” Jin Ling glared and Lan JingYi chuckled.

“Anyhow, I don’t mind.” Lan SiZhui added. “I needed to go to the Cloud Recesses to heal my Golden Core anyways and only Wen Chao knows where Wen Ning was held. Perhaps, by the time he begins to talk, I’ll be healed enough.”

“You’re right.” Jin Ling agreed. “We needed to go there sooner or later anyways.” Then, under his breath, he said: “I just hoped it would be later.”

“Let us enjoy today then.” Lan JingYi said. “I’ve never been to Lotus Pier properly.”

“Don’t think I’ll show you around like Wei WuXian. I’m not a servant.” Jin Ling snapped at him.

“He’s not either.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“That is complicated.” Jin Ling made a face. “Anyways. I meant to visit this place where they sell tanghulu.”



As Jiang FengMian said, the next morning three boats left Lotus Pier. One carried Lan WangJi, Jin Ling and Wei WuXian with Wen Chao, while the other carried Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui and Jiang Cheng with Wen ZhuLiu. The third was with Jiang FengMian and two dozen Jiang and Yu soldiers. The light lavender colored robes had been around Lotus Pier since Lan SiZhui had returned, but he never realized they were Yu Clan disciples until Jin Ling pointed it out to him.

Lan SiZhui was unreasonably nervous about returning to the Cloud Recesses. In the Burial Mounds, he'd been so set on getting out and hunting down Wen Chao, he never thought about what he would do once he succeeded. Not that he considered his mission done. He still needed to question Wen Chao about Wen Ning's location. Dead or alive, Lan SiZhui would take him back to his sister.

The farmlands of Gusu came into view as they rowed down the river, and Lan SiZhui felt his stomach twist. Even though the last shift change had been only an hour earlier, he still stood and went to the cabin of the boat, leaning in.

Jiang Cheng was sitting across Wen ZhuLiu, eyes narrowed as he watched the other man. His hand was on his sword hilt and at Wen ZhuLiu's smallest movement he tightened his grip on it.

“Young Master Jiang, would you like a break?” Lan SiZhui asked. “We're almost there.”

“Then it's not long now. It's fine.” Jiang Cheng said. By common agreement, Lan SiZhui was not supposed to stay alone with Wen ZhuLiu, since he now lacked spiritual energy to fight back properly. Because of this, Lan JingYi and Jiang Cheng had been watching the prisoner since they left and changed watch at every hour or so.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, disappointed. Before he could leave though, Jiang Cheng looked over at him and frowned.

“You're deadly pale. Is everything alright?”

“I get seasick.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “It's worse when I see the water move as well.”

“Huh.” Jiang Cheng hummed, looked over at Wen ZhuLiu, then stood. “You can stay inside. Indeed, I could use a few minutes outside. I'll send Lan JingYi in.”

“It's fine.” Lan SiZhui said, relieved. He climbed into the seat next to where Jiang Cheng abandoned. “I have a feeling Core-Melting Hand would not attack me.”

“I won't put our lives on the line based on your gut feeling. I'll send JingYi in.” Jiang Cheng told him, then left the cabin. Lan SiZhui sighed, frustrated but understanding at the same time.



Wen ZhuLiu didn't look worse for wear from his time being imprisoned. He still had an expressionless face, and even though him and Wen Chao had both been redressed – first because their clothes had been taken, then to deceive Gusu's civilians, who would not only get frightened by two Wen appearing again, but also recognize them and tell others about it who shouldn't know they were alive and in Cloud Recesses. Now Wen ZhuLiu had a muted blue robe on, coarse, clearly not an expensive robe but one one would see on a servant instead. His hands were tied behind his back and his feet were also closely tied up. It was almost impossible to move like that. Lan SiZhui also suspected it was incredibly uncomfortable.

“Ginger root.” Wen ZhuLiu's voice came so unexpectedly, Lan SiZhui almost jumped at it. He looked back at the other man curiously and confused.

“I'm afraid I don't understand.” He said.

“I used to get seasick as a kid as well. My father gave me ginger root to chew while we were on water and it would help me to the point where I wouldn't need it anymore by the time I turned fourteen.” Wen ZhuLiu told him calmly. Lan SiZhui was puzzled as to why he said this, but still, he found this interesting.

“Just chewing it made the sickness go away?”

“Mn.” Wen ZhuLiu nodded. Before Lan SiZhui could say anything else, the curtain of the cabin flipped open and Lan JingYi stepped inside, making himself comfortable next to Lan SiZhui right away.

“We're almost there.” Lan JingYi said, then yawned widely.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed quietly. They didn't talk much, simply sitting in silence for a while. Then, the boat jostled and for a moment, Lan SiZhui thought they were in danger. People left and boarded the boat, then the curtain flipped again and two Lan disciples entered. They bowed to Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi.

“Brothers, let us take the prisoner.” They requested, and Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui helped them pull Wen ZhuLiu on his feet, leading him out of the cabin between the four of them.

Lan SiZhui squinted as he stepped out at the deck, blinking rapidly to get used to the light. This time of the year Gusu and its surrounding area was covered in snow, making the otherwise light-colored city seem even brighter. On the usually dark-blue rooftops white snow sat, and the usually blooming trees were bald and also covered in a blanket of white.

Lan SiZhui paused for a moment to take in the sight, then Wen ZhuLiu was helped onto the shore and so he also left the boat, welcoming solid ground underneath his feet. The other two boats had already been unloaded, and so, everyone was already waiting for them. As soon as the third boat had been emptied, they headed down the main street towards the entrance of Cloud Recesses. There was ten or so Lan disciples who had been waiting for their arrival and were now reinforcing the prisoners' security. Lan SiZhui spotted a familiar face or two, but he wouldn't be able to name the men, even though they expressed their joy at having Lan SiZhui back like they were old friends.

Jin Ling had joined the two of them as they walked, and Lan SiZhui had the feeling this had happened before, the three of them walking the streets of Gusu, the mood stale.

Slowly, they reached the stairs leading up to the mountain. The way up was slow, due to Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu's chains that restricted their movements, and also Sect Leader Jiang needed a few breaks on the way up. Lan SiZhui was secretly glad for these excuses to go slow and stop every once a while – he, too, wasn't in the best shape for this climb, and he needed just as many breaks as Jiang FengMian.

The climb didn't take forever though and they've reached the gates surprisingly quickly. There, the guards bowed to them and stepped aside to let them up. Lan SiZhui was surprised to see not only two, but four guards there. He suspected this was a preventative measure in case they were attacked again.

Seeing the familiar, snowy paths of Cloud Recesses' mountains was like Lan SiZhui was a kid again. He remembered he used to be really cold during the winters, needing multiple layers not to get cold. Despite this, he still enjoyed playing with snow. Other kids would find it bothersome, but Lan SiZhui would try to shape it into little things – he once tried to make the Cloud Recesses from snow, but failed miserably. Lan JingYi, years later, built a rabbit from snow and Lan SiZhui remembered he was heartbroken when it melted.

"The Cloud Recesses is truly a harsh place in the winter." Wei WuXian complained as he tried to get rid of some snow that fell into his collar at his neck. They were only a few minutes away from the top and stopped to break. "This explains why the Lan are such cold people."

"I thought that was because of the three thousand rules." Jin Ling huffed.

"Boys, is it wise to insult the Lan in their own home?" Jiang FengMian looked over with a flat look.

"Uncle Jiang, it's not insulting them! I'm just making an observation! Right, Lan Zhan? You're not offended?" Wei WuXian turned to Lan WangJi with a grin. Lan WangJi returned the look with an icy one of his own and Wei WuXian laughed, while Jiang Cheng seemed slightly intimidated. He swatted at Wei WuXian.

"Of course, he's offended. You're being noisy again."

"How can it be the reason anyways?" Lan JingYi inserted. "Snow is much fun. Ah, when I was a child, the lake near Moling would freeze over and us, kids, would go there to slide on the ice."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Jin Ling frowned. Lan JingYi shook his head.

"If the ice is smooth and you learn how to glide on it, it's like you're flying. I'll take you one day to try it." He grinned and Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"I'm not a child anymore. If I want to fly, I will just fly."

“It’s not just for children.” Lan JingYi said, offended. “My mother taught me how to do it. She also loved to play on the ice.”

“It sounds delightful.” Jiang FengMian smiled.

“Ah, Sect Leader Jiang wants to try as well?” Lan JingYi grinned, then it slowly faded. “Although when you’re learning, you might fall a lot. I don’t want to cause the Sect Leader injuries.”

“It’s not like we have time to play around now.” Jin Ling said. “We don’t even know if we’ll survive the war.”

“Then, if we do, I’ll take Sect Leader Jiang and you to try it.” Lan JingYi said.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Let’s go. I’m tired of these stairs.”

With that, the lot of them began climbing again. Lan SiZhui was grateful for this conversation, for it took his mind off of the fact they were almost at home. On the last few steps, he felt less nervous than before and felt foolish for ever being nervous in the first place. After all, this was his home. There was no reason to feel anxious returning.

At the gates, four more guards were looking out for the gates, but they also let them in without a word. Just as they entered, they were greeted by the Lan Sect. Lan XiChen was there, smiling as he watched the guests arrive. A few more disciples were at his side, and two of them stepped forward, joining the guards framing the Wen.

“Esteemed guests, welcome back.” Lan XiChen told them, bowing. Once the Jiang also returned it, he turned to his own. “WangJi, it is good to see you again. Lan JingYi, Young Master Jin.” He bowed to them as well, then smiled at Lan SiZhui. “Lan SiZhui, it is a relief to see you safe and in good health.”

“Relatively good health.” Jin Ling muttered under his breath as the two bowed to each other.

“Sect Leader Lan, it is good to see you’re also safe and in good health.” Jiang FengMian said. “Excuse us for the intrusion.”

“It is fine.” Lan XiChen nodded, then turned to the Wen. “Young Master Wen, Core-Melting Hand. Welcome to Cloud Recesses.”

“Lan XiChen, you’re still playing nice while we’re in chains?” Wen Chao snorted. “You’re no better than Jiang FengMian. You act as if you feel bad for taking us prisoners, but in reality, you’re just waiting for the opportunity to humiliate us.”

“It is not my intention to make you feel uncomfortable.” Lan XiChen said lightly. “Although I hope you understand your stay here will not be pleasant.”

“Ch.” Wen Chao looked away, rolling his eyes. Lan XiChen pressed his lips together and turned to the guards.

“Please, take Young Master Wen and Core-Melting Hand to the rearranged rooms.” He requested.

“Sect Leader Lan, may I have a request?” Jiang FengMian chimed in. Lan XiChen gestured him. “May I ask that my men also guard the Wen while they’re here?”

“Ah, of course.” Lan XiChen nodded and gestured the guards. The lot of them bowed to the Sect Leaders, then with the lead of the two newly joined men headed deeper into the Cloud Recesses. Lan XiChen turned to the guests. “We have also prepared guest rooms for you to rest. Tomorrow, we shall began our discussion about the Wen.”

“Much appreciated.” Jiang FengMian nodded.

“Ah, WangJi, Young Master Jin, Lan SiZhui, JingYi, would you mind staying? I need to have a word.”

At this, Wei WuXian frowned, but then he turned to Lan WangJi and told him something too quietly for Lan SiZhui to hear. Lan WangJi’s expression hardened and he shook his head. Wei WuXian laughed, then joined his family, who bid their goodbyes, heading after one of the Lan who led them towards the guest rooms.

“Can we also go inside?” Jin Ling complained. “I can hardly feel my hands anymore.”

“Of course.” Lan XiChen nodded to the last remaining Lan disciple at his side. “Please, take the disciples to the Hanshi. I need to have a word with my brother, then I’ll join you.” With that, the three of them were led away from the brothers and towards the Hanshi. At first, they were all quiet, then Jin Ling turned to Lan JingYi.

“JingYi”? Just how familiar did the two of you become?” Lan JingYi shifted uncomfortably.

“It’s nothing. He just prefers it.” They were led to the Hanshi, where they were served tea. They didn’t need to wait more than five minutes and the door opened again and Lan XiChen entered. He smiled at them, then activated a silencing charm before joining them at the table.

“I hope your journey was safe and quick.” He said as he also poured himself some tea.

“We’re here, aren’t we?” Jin Ling crossed his arms.

“Indeed.” Lan XiChen smiled. “I’m very relieved to see the two of you. Young Master Jin, I’ve heard you’ve also became the topic of conversation because of your accomplishments in the battles of Lotus Pier. I’ve heard you’ve also gained a title as well.” He smiled good-naturedly.

“Of all people, you’re the least allowed to call me MouShi!” Jin Ling snapped unexpectedly, jumping up. At this, the three Lan looked up at him surprised.

“Ah, my apologies.” Lan XiChen said after a moment. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I believed this title brings you honor.”

“The most it brings me is unpleasant memories. Just forget about it!”

“As you wish. Please, sit.” Lan XiChen requested gently, and with a huff, Jin Ling complied. “Regardless of the title, I’m still in awe hearing the rumors about your deeds.”

“I thought the Lan aren’t supposed to listen to rumors.” Jin Ling huffed, clearly uncomfortable being praised.

“Mn.” Lan XiChen smiled. “Then, perhaps, you can confirm or deny what I’ve heard about your bow as well.” He nodded towards the bow that Jin Ling laid across his knees when he sat. Jin Ling scoffed.

“Depends on what you’ve heard.” Jin Ling said flippantly.

“People speak of it as a dangerous new spiritual tool. They compare its speed and deadliness to that of a wasp. Not once have I heard people mention all you see is a flash of yellow spiritual glare and the next moment ten Wen soldiers fall.” Jin Ling snorted at this, shaking his head.

“Ten would be an overstatement.” He said. “But otherwise, the rumors this time seem to be correct.” Lan SiZhui was truly puzzled by Jin Ling’s mood changes. One moment he would snap at anyone who dared to praise his cunning, then the next moment he would take great pride in his spiritual tool.

“MouShi truly has some impressing skills.” Lan JingYi agreed.

“You—!” Jin Ling glared. “One of these days, I’ll truly break your legs.”

“Of course.” Lan JingYi grinned at him.

“Anyhow, this is not what I wanted to talk to you about.” Lan XiChen smiled, then his expression turned to serious. “I assume by now Lan JingYi had told you that I know where you three are from.”

“He said.” Jin Ling said, eying Lan JingYi coldly.

“It’s not like it was my fault.” Lan JingYi defended. “No need to look at me like that.”

“It truly isn’t his fault.” Lan XiChen said. “I have suspected it all this time, but I didn’t see a point in saying anything. I assumed you came here under someone’s command. Since two of you were Lan, I had no reason to assume whoever sent you had ill intentions. I apologize for not speaking up earlier.”

“It’s not like that would’ve helped.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“From what JingYi tells me, the three of you didn’t come here on purpose. I’m sure finding we did not know you or that you have returned here was scary. JingYi tells me you didn’t know anything about the *Collection of Time*. If I spoke up earlier, perhaps I could’ve helped you return to your own time. You needn’t to have endured so much.” He said sadly, looking over at Lan SiZhui, who shifted uncomfortably.

“It’s not like we wanted to return.” Jin Ling said. “At least not all of us.” He glared at Lan SiZhui.

“So, I’ve gathered.” Lan XiChen hummed. “I assume the two of you wanted to act, but Lan SiZhui was conflicted about it? I remember, in the early days you’ve argued a lot. Then Lan SiZhui came to me for advice. At the time I assumed you learned something you were not prepared for and hoped I’d be able to shed light on it, but perhaps your questions were more literate?”

“This is an old argument.” Lan JingYi said before Jin Ling could say anything. “A lot had happened since then, so there’s no reason to bring it up now.” He looked pointedly at Jin Ling, who huffed and looked away.

“I apologize for bringing it up then.” Lan XiChen bowed his head. “And for not speaking up when I should’ve.”

“It doesn’t matter now anyways.” Jin Ling shifted uncomfortably. “There’s no point apologizing. Let’s just move on.” He paused. “Now that you know our secret, what do you want to do? Send us back?”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible anymore.” Lan XiChen shook his head. “The three of you made friends and enemies here. If you suddenly went missing, it would be noticeable.”

“But you don’t want us to change the past, so what? You’re going to tell us not to do anything?” Jin Ling raised his chin challengingly.

“No.” Lan XiChen shook his head. “Of course, I’d prefer if you’d not interfere much, but seeing your positions, I’m afraid that’s not possible anymore either. Young Master Jin had become a hero and his inaction would humiliate not only the Jin and Jiang Sect but would also result in him becoming public enemy. Naturally, I’d like to avoid this. Lan SiZhui had also become an important figure in the war. As for JingYi, I have showed up in Koi Tower with him by my side, declaring him my confidant, so people will wonder about him as well.” He paused. “Perhaps it would be best if you kept acting as you have been so far. Although I do not wish to know about the future, I have a suspicion that you also have a goal in doing the things you are doing, whether it is to save people like JingYi says he intends or saving your family?”

“What’s it to you?” Jin Ling eyed him. “If you don’t want to know of the future, don’t ask us about our plans.” He said, irritated.

“That was not my intention. I’m merely curious if you’ve made plans already that I need to be aware of. In case you haven’t, perhaps I may be able to help figure it out, if you wish of course.”

“We have plans.” Lan SiZhui inserted before Jin Ling could say anything else. “Sect Leader Lan needn’t to be worried.”

“I see.” Lan XiChen smiled.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, about these plans actually...” Lan SiZhui trailed off, unsure if he should proceed. Him and the others hadn’t discussed this yet and perhaps it would have been better if they did, but it wasn’t like Lan SiZhui planned on doing this. He needed information from Wen Chao and now he had the opportunity to ask.

“Yes?” Lan XiChen looked at him curiously.

“Wen Chao is hiding some information that I need to gather. Would you mind if I questioned him before anyone else does?”

“What is this about?” Jin Ling frowned. “You haven’t said anything about Wen Chao having some important information. Is this about the Yin Iron?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui told him curtly.

“Ah, it’s about Wen Ning, isn’t it?” Lan JingYi snapped his fingers. Lan SiZhui bowed his head but nodded. As expected, this did not sit well with Jin Ling.

“What, you really want to look for him? He’s dead by now and we’re better off for it. I swear if you bring him back, I will not hesitate to stab you as well!” He slapped the table in irritation.

“I have no intention to bring him back.” Lan SiZhui told him. “I wouldn’t know how to anyways.”

“You don’t?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “The cultivation I use is unlike the YiLing Patriarch’s. Besides, his morals are different. While it was no problem for him to bring back the dead, I wouldn’t do that.”

“You say this now.” Jin Ling scoffed. “But you can’t say this for sure. What if you see Wen Ning’s body and decide you miss the Ghost General?”

“Jin Ling, don’t be mean.” Lan JingYi said.

“I’m being logical.” Jin Ling argued.

“If I find him dead, I’ll just bring his body back to his family.” Lan SiZhui said.

“Then I’ll go with you to make sure you do.” Jin Ling glared.

“Of course, we’re going with him.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. When Lan SiZhui looked at him surprised, he raised his eyebrows. “What, did you think we’ll let you do something so dangerous again without going with you?”

“Exactly because it’s dangerous you should stay.” Lan SiZhui told him. “I do not wish to put the two of you in danger again.”

“You’re not. It is our decision to go with you.”

“I take this Wen Ning is important?” Lan XiChen asked curiously. Lan SiZhui felt embarrassed that once again, the three of them fell into discussion without minding the fourth person in the room.

“He’s my cousin.” He answered with a nod, turning back to Lan XiChen. “When I went missing some months ago, he was threatened because of me. I owe him to find him, even if it’s just his body to take back to his family.”

“I see. In this case, you can question Wen Chao. But please, be careful.”

“Should we go with you?” Lan JingYi asked.

“It might be best if I’m alone.” Lan SiZhui told him and the two accepted it easily.

“Then I’ll send for a guard to take you to the rooms where we hold the Wen. Young Master Jin, you were placed in the guest rooms next to the Jiang Sect. A servant will take you there.” Jin Ling nodded. “If that’s all, you should go and rest.”

“Thank you, Sect Leader Lan.”

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Jiang doctor: 话轻 Huà Qīng: Huà: “dialect; language/spoken words” Qīng: “light/easy/gentle”



## Righteousness III.

After they've finished their discussion, Lan SiZhui was escorted to the rooms by a guard. He parted from Jin Ling and Lan JingYi with the promise to have dinner together and discuss what he finds out from Wen Chao. Lan SiZhui didn't mind that much that they wanted to go with him, after all, he knew he was stronger with them by his side. He just wasn't sure he'd find out anything from Wen Chao if they were to come.

He was led away from the main buildings, closer to the back mountains. This part of the Cloud Recesses was not usually used, though some rooms were out here ever since Lan SiZhui had known Cloud Recesses. He never knew what these rooms were for. As a kid, sometimes he'd wander here with Lan JingYi and play in the empty houses that were older than the rest of the buildings. Since the fire didn't reach here, these were still original buildings from hundreds of years ago when the Cloud Recesses was originally built.

Lan JingYi had an ongoing theory that this was where the original Sect stayed, and they expanded to the rest of the mountain, forgetting these rooms existed. He believed they were haunted, even after he learned that the Cloud Recesses was protected against spirits. Lan SiZhui never really believed this theory. He thought this was just some private quarters where people came to live in seclusion.

Now, this abandoned part of the Cloud Recesses was full of life, several guards and servants wandering about. Some rooms' doors were open and servants were making food or washing clothes here.

There were guards posing in front of two of the rooms, serious-faced men with their hands on their swords. Lan SiZhui saw that they were not all Lan disciples, there were some Jiang and Yu disciples as well. As they approached, the guards tensed, then seeing they were friendly, they relaxed.

"Brothers, this Lan brother would like to talk to the prisoners." The guard who came with him told to two guards posing in front of one of the rooms.

"Brother Lan, please, hand over your weapons before entering." One of the Meishan guards requested, holding out his hand. Lan SiZhui only had Yingjiu on him and Hudie in his qiankun pouch. He handed the sword over but kept the bag – after all, if Wen Chao took hold of it, he could hardly use it as a weapon. With this out of the way, the guard warned him not to get too close and if Wen Chao tried anything, he was to call for the guards, not to try fighting with Wen Chao.

After he'd listened to the instructions and agreed to them, he entered. As he remembered, the room looked much like any other guest rooms of Cloud Recesses. Wen Chao was sitting in front of the low table, sipping some tea, facing the door. As Lan SiZhui entered, he looked up with a bored and annoyed expression. Then, when he realized who entered, he smirked, raising his chin.

“Lan SiZhui, so you’ve come.” Lan SiZhui gestured at the table questioningly and Wen Chao made a signal to sit. After Lan SiZhui was seated, Wen Chao kept gazing at him, not offering tea as should be polite. “I suspect you’ve come to ask about your cousin.”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“You know, Lan SiZhui, all week he’d hoped you’d come. He told us many times so. ‘Lan SiZhui will come back, and you’ll be sorry.’ How arrogant.” He spit, face set in a frown. “We even had to imprison Wen Qing when she came for him.”

“Wen Qing is also imprisoned?” Lan SiZhui asked, alarmed.

“It was her own fault.” Wen Chao said. “She admitted she also helped you, hoping she could trade her life for his. How foolish.” He shook his head, as if disappointed.

“Are they alive?”

“Who can tell?” Wen Chao shrugged. “I left them in the care of my men. I told them to do whatever they pleased with those traitors.” Lan SiZhui’s hand clenched into a fist. Seeing his breathing deepen and his muscles tensing, Wen Chao smirked meanly. “Only if you came earlier, you’d have been able to save them. I wasn’t lying. I keep my word. If you brought the Yin Iron, they would’ve been excused from their crimes. More so, I’d have sent them to Qishan to be safe.”

“Where did you leave them?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“I’ve been around so much, I can’t recall.” Wen Chao shrugged. “However, I also have a question, Lan SiZhui.” He leaned forward. Lan SiZhui glared at him.

“Young Master Wen, you’re not in the position to ask questions.” At this, Wen Chao barked out a laugh, head thrown back. Lan SiZhui was caught off guard and jerked back in surprise.

“Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui.” Wen Chao chuckled, grinning at him. “You really think my father doesn’t know exactly where I am?” He pinched the robes he had on, which were plain black clothes, and tugged. “You can take my clothes and make it look like fierce corpses tore us apart. But my father is not just a common person who’s so easily fooled.” Lan SiZhui was alarmed, wondering how Wen Chao knew this was what they’ve done. Did someone tell him? But no, surely, nobody would tell him their plans. Wen Chao was not stupid, he probably came to the same conclusion when his clothes were taken away.

“If so, attacking us would be an act of war.”

“Why?” Wen Chao hummed. “You’ve imprisoned his son. He has every right to come for me.”

“He also knows the main Sects hold you accountable for what had happened during the indoctrination.”

“What had happened?” Wen Chao cocked an eyebrow. “Nobody important died and if they did; this was a night-hunt. What did you expect? Of course, people will die.” Lan SiZhui was

quiet for a long time, then stood.

“If you won’t tell me their location, then there’s no point for further conversation.”

“Hold up.” Wen Chao held up his hand, looking up at Lan SiZhui with an annoyed expression. “I still have a question.”

“And I’m not interested in answering unless you tell me where Wen Qing and Wen Ning were held.” Lan SiZhui told him with a steely gaze.

“You want to make a deal?” Wen Chao raised his eyebrows. Lan SiZhui paused, considering. Then, deciding this was not dangerous, he slowly sat back down, keeping his eyes on Wen Chao.

“If you tell me where they were held, I will answer your question.”

“Deal.” Wen Chao smirked. Lan SiZhui’s brows furrowed, he felt like he just walked into a trap, but he couldn’t see how. Instead, he gestured Wen Chao to begin. “I have two questions actually. So, one answer for each their locations.”

“You said it yourself, they were held together.” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“I’ve never said that.” Wen Chao looked at him deadpan. Lan SiZhui thought back to the conversation and realized he was right. Annoyed, he nodded. Wen Chao seemed pleased, and asked: “The Yin Iron, is it really in your possession?” Lan SiZhui paused, unsure how he should proceed. It didn’t matter if he lied or not, after all, Wen Chao couldn’t do anything about it in his position at the moment. On the other hand, if he ever escaped, people would come for Lan SiZhui and wouldn’t care who else they kill, until they find the Yin Iron. Still debating internally, he said:

“I want the location of Wen Ning first, then I’ll answer.”

“So tiresome.” Wen Chao grumbled, then looked at him with humor. “He was held in the following locations: YiLing, Zhongshu, Nanqing, Xiangwei and Tangshui.” Lan SiZhui was confused. He frowned at Wen Chao questioningly, who smirked. “Lan SiZhui, you never said you wanted to know his last location or the locations in order.” Lan SiZhui could not fault Wen Chao. He admitted he was outsmarted. Still, this was better than not knowing at all. He memorized the names and nodded.

“I do not have the Yin Iron.”

“Is it even in the Burial Mounds?” Wen Chao asked, annoyed at this. Lan SiZhui raised his eyebrows now.

“Is that your second question, Young Master Wen?” Wen Chao glared at him, then collected himself and shook his head.

“My second question is less forward.” He thought for a moment, then asked: “Was you using resentful energy the thing that saved you in the Burial Mounds?” Lan SiZhui thought about the question. He realized this had to be multiple questions; Wen Chao wanted to know how

he survived the Burial Mounds and also how he came to use resentful energy. Lan SiZhui looked up at Wen Chao then. “Ah, right, my answer. Wen Qing was held in the following places: YiLing, Zhongshu, Nanqing, Xiangwei and Tangshui.” He smirked. Lan SiZhui almost rolled his eyes.

“So, they were held together.” Lan SiZhui concluded.

“You didn’t answer yet.” Wen Chao pointed out with a shrug.

“If you want me to answer, give me a different answer.”

“Lan SiZhui, I feel like you’re not keeping the conditions of the deal.” Wen Chao looked down at him. Lan SiZhui thought for a moment, then said:

“Since these are not the locations of one or the other, but actually both of theirs, weren’t you the one to violate the terms first?” Wen Chao looked at him annoyed, then thought for a moment.

“How about this, how about I tell you where they were held first, so you needn’t to search there?” He smiled, as if this was a good-natured offer. Lan SiZhui huffed, then nodded. “They were first held in YiLing. Now, answer my question.”

“No, demonic cultivation was not what saved me in the Burial Mounds.” Lan SiZhui said. He believed he could’ve survived if it wasn’t for demonic cultivation, though it wouldn’t have been pleasant, nor would’ve been as untouched by resentful energy, he would’ve survived.

“I see.” Wen Chao pulled his mouth. Lan SiZhui stood again.

“If there’s nothing else, Young Master Wen, then I’ll be leaving.”

“You’re dismissed.” Wen Chao waved distractedly, as if Lan SiZhui was his subordinate who asked for permission. Lan SiZhui refrained from rolling his eyes once again and headed out of the room.

Outside, the guards immediately turned to him, hands on their hilts. Seeing Lan SiZhui emerge, they stood at ease. Lan SiZhui thought for a moment, then remembered what had happened at the boat and looked over at the other room where guards were posing. Wen ZhuLiu was strangely forward with him on the boat, offering up his help like that. Perhaps, if he went to him, he’d be more forward with answers as well?

Besides Wen Ning’s location, Lan SiZhui was also curious about other things regarding Wen ZhuLiu that had been bothering him since they met at the Lotus Pier. Lan SiZhui never believed Wen ZhuLiu was a fair opponent, but from his behavior in Lotus Pier, how he didn’t crush Lan SiZhui’s Core, then later in YiLing as well, he thought there might be more to the other man than met the eye. He turned to the Lan disciple who led him here and asked:

“May I question Core-Melting Hand as well?”

“Sect Leader Lan said to grant any wish you had short of freeing the prisoners.” The man nodded. “If brother Lan wishes, he can question the other prisoner as well.”

With this, he gestured Lan SiZhui towards the other room. Lan SiZhui received warnings once again, then was granted access.

Inside, unlike Wen Chao, Wen ZhuLiu did not enjoy the luxuries the room had to offer. He was sitting in a chair, his hands tied to the back. The table had been taken away as well. Lan SiZhui wondered how would Wen ZhuLiu sleep like that, but he did not question it. Instead, he paused in the doorway, taking in the sight before moving inside.

Once the door closed behind him, Lan SiZhui took a hesitant step closer. “Sir if you promise not to attack, may I untie you?” He asked, feeling uncomfortable talking to him like this. Wen ZhuLiu seemed surprised by the question, but nodded simply. Lan SiZhui moved behind him and untied his hands. “Once I leave, I’m afraid I’ll have to put it back.”

“Understood.” Wen ZhuLiu nodded, bringing his hands forward and massaging his wrists. Lan SiZhui moved to sit where he would if there was a table and Wen ZhuLiu sat across him, much like Wen Chao had, without the table in between them. Wen ZhuLiu watched him curiously, calculating.

“Sir, I came to you because back in the forest, you haven’t answered a question I had.” Lan SiZhui began. Although this wasn’t the only reason, Lan SiZhui felt his topic to be safer to start with than an interrogation about Wen Ning’s location right away. Wen ZhuLiu looked at him questioningly. “When you had the chance in the forest, even back in YiLing and even before that, in Lotus Pier, why didn’t you kill me or crushed my Golden Core?” At this, Wen ZhuLiu’s eyes narrowed. He was quiet for a long time and Lan SiZhui didn’t think he would answer when he began talking.

“I have a question to answer with to yours.” He said almost as if he was hesitant to ask. Lan SiZhui made an inquiring noise. “Why can’t your Golden Core be crushed?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Lan SiZhui frowned. Wen ZhuLiu looked him in the eyes as he told him:

“In Lotus Pier, that hit should’ve caused serious internal injuries. Ones you shouldn’t have been able to recover from in months. When in YiLing you used your spiritual energy, I thought I might’ve miscalculated and did not hit you as hard as I intended.” He paused here, then held out his hand, palm up, as if asking for something. “May I?”

Lan SiZhui hesitated – it was not a good idea to give his hand to someone with such dangerous powers in their palm, but in the end, he decided Wen ZhuLiu promised not to attack him, so he held out his hand. Wen ZhuLiu took his wrist, so only his fingertips touched Lan SiZhui’s skin. After he found what he was looking for, he pulled back his hand and narrowed his eyes at Lan SiZhui.

“In YiLing I purposefully hit you harder. I sensed I have managed to injure you greatly. Yet, instead of having died in the Burial Mounds, you’re sitting here with a healing Golden Core.”

“Sir, what you’re trying to tell me is that you’ve tried to crush my Golden Core and was unsuccessful?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows in confusion.

“I have not tried to use my powers on you before, but the hits you’ve endured from me would’ve resulted in great internal injuries that should’ve affected your Golden Core to the point of it being unable to heal you, which should’ve resulted in your death.” Wen ZhuLiu was not hesitant to answer this question and he spoke without much emotion, so Lan SiZhui did not take offense in the words spoken.

He watched Wen ZhuLiu for a long time, trying to determine whether the other was lying. “So, why didn’t I die?”

“Precisely.” Wen ZhuLiu nodded. Lan SiZhui looked away, feeling like he was being studied way too closely. Then, he remembered another thing he wanted to ask and felt a change in topic would be better than continuing this confusing conversation.

“Sir, may I ask, why are you obeying the Wen Sect? What debt are you repaying?” He asked curiously. It was Wen ZhuLiu’s turn to look away. Again, it took him a while to speak, but eventually, he began:

“The Zhao Clan was a small one near the south-western borders of the Wen Sect’s territory, near Meishan. Western tribes there were savage and the only barrier standing between them and the rest of our country were these four Clans: MeishanYu, NiYangZhao, BalingOuYang and JinxingShu.

“Once, these tribes had orchestrated an attack against the westernmost barrier, MeishanYu and NiYangZhao. As important Clans, it was expected that the five great Sects would support them in times of trouble, so as was custom, the Clans sent for help. Only one of the five Sects had answered the summons. By then, Meishan had successfully evaded its attackers and supported NiYang, but even with their joined forces, the damage was already done.

“Since Meishan was also damaged during this attack, they were unable to offer support to the fallen Zhao Clan. By the time the Wen Sect arrived, all they could do was to collect the survivors and take them to Qishan to care for them properly, to salvage what was left of the Clan and offer even more support to the west.”

Lan SiZhui had only heard of this very briefly in his studies. He remembered this was discussed when they learned about the great acts of the different Sects. The Wen Sect, the teacher said, despite its later failings had been a renowned and respected Sect and helped a lot before Wen RuoHan ran it to the ground. Wen RuoHan wasn’t known for being savage before the war, but instead was a beloved Sect Leader with great accomplishments to his name, one of which was to have stabilized the western borders.

“The Wen Sect is responsible for the relative peace at the west now?” Lan SiZhui blinked, somewhat surprised – while he’d indeed learned about this, this was such a small and barely brushed up on part of his studies, he’d never really thought about it in terms of the Wen Sect that saved the west being the same as the one that wanted to rule over the world.

“Sect Leader Wen had helped the smaller Clans more than any other main Sects. They cared for even those who were not in their territory.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui nodded, glad to know this. Even though he had no desire to reclaim his family name, it was good to know the Wen Sect wasn’t all evil, there was some good to be said about them as well. With how quick the cultivation world was with judgement, they rarely heard about these accomplishments. “May I ask how this relates to my question?”

“You’ve asked me, back in the forest, why am I on their side, why am I loyal to the Wen. I was eleven years old when the Wen Sect saved me and the remainder of my Clan. They became my family, and I have vowed to never watch my family get slaughtered again.”

Lan SiZhui felt this was unfair. “But sir, doesn’t it feel hypocrite to do this? After all, now, instead of being slaughtered, they have turned around and slaughter others. The same thing that happened to your family happens to others because of you now. Isn’t that unfair?”

“It is not my place to question Sect Leader Wen’s orders.” Wen ZhuLiu answered simply. “My order is to protect his son from death and that is what I am going to do, even if I have to give up my life for his.”

“I still don’t understand.” Lan SiZhui said. “Wen RuoHan saved you, but is that worth all of this?”

“Sect Leader Wen did not only save me. I owe him more than my life and loyalty.”

“What did he do?” Lan SiZhui was now curious. Wen ZhuLiu hesitated with the answer, but in the end, he mustn’t have seen a reason not to share and said:

“I have grown up in NiYang before Sect Leader Wen took me to Qishan. As Zhao ZhuLiu, I was not a strong cultivator. In Qishan, all survivors were offered a place in the palace. Not having a strong cultivation, I chose to look after the library. As the fights in the west went on, more and more sieged artefacts from the western tribes were taken to Qishan. One of them was a manual that described the secret behind the western tribes’ success; it was the technique to crush one’s Golden Core with their bare hands.

“When I discovered this, I notified the Wen immediately. Realizing the importance of this information, I was taken in front of Sect Leader Wen. When he learned about this, he was delighted to have this advantage. However, the techniques described in these manuals was dangerous knowledge and should’ve been destroyed. Before he gave the order, as a sign of his thanks, Sect Leader Wen asked me if perhaps I wanted to learn the technique, so when I come to age, I can join his ranks and fight against the tribes with their own weapons.

“Naturally, I said yes. Because of Sect Leader Wen, my weak cultivation didn’t matter anymore, I was able to take revenge on the people who killed my family. If not for Sect Leader Wen, I would’ve lived my life as a pathetic, mediocre person who couldn’t even protect their family. I have not only taken revenge but helped establishing the relative peace of the west, so these small Clans this country depends on do not have to struggle anymore and aren’t dependent on the help of the major Sects.”

Lan SiZhui felt this sounded way too much like Wen ZhuLiu sold himself to Wen RuoHan for revenge, but he was in no place to judge. In a way, he understood Wen ZhuLiu’s position. In a way, he supposed, he was also very similar.

Perhaps... Lan SiZhui wondered, was this why Wen ZhuLiu asked in the forest why Lan SiZhui rejected Wen Chao's offer to join the Wen Sect. For Wen ZhuLiu, it must sound strange, that since Lan SiZhui had the chance to rejoin his own people, an opportunity Wen ZhuLiu himself must've wished to have once, he did not wish to do so.

"I see." Lan SiZhui said quietly, deep in thought. Wen ZhuLiu let him think about what they've talked about. Looking at him, Lan SiZhui didn't see a man who would throw his life away for Wen Chao and wondered why was this – now that he thought about it, Wen ZhuLiu was never really eager to protect Wen Chao. When his life was in direct danger, he would step in, but other than their duel in YiLing, he rarely initiated an action on his own. Now, that Lan SiZhui thought about it, he thought perhaps in YiLing he was just curious why Lan SiZhui wasn't in bed, healing from his injury Wen ZhuLiu had caused him in Lotus Pier.

"May I ask why you're so calm?" Lan SiZhui asked after a long pause. Wen ZhuLiu, who seemed to have begun meditating while he thought, opened his eyes and raised questioning eyebrows. "Wen Chao is currently held prisoner. If your order is to protect him, shouldn't you be concerned about his well-being?"

"Wen Chao is the son of Wen RuoHan and Sect Leaders Jiang and Lan are diplomatic." Here, an expression crossed his face. Now, that Lan SiZhui was aware of the history, he wondered if this diplomacy was one of the, if not the main, reasons that the Jiang Sect also didn't rush to the Zhao Clan's aid. "They know better than harm the Young Master."

"I see." Lan SiZhui noted, while Wen ZhuLiu was quiet and mostly a soldier, he was also observant and smart. Having ran out of questions, Lan SiZhui decided it was time to ask about Wen Ning. "Sir, Young Master Wen refuses to tell me, so I've hoped you'd provide me with some answers regarding Wen Ning and Wen Qing."

Wen ZhuLiu was quiet for a long moment, then said:

"They are dead."

"But..." Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. "Young Master Wen said he left them to his men's mercy."

"Mn." Wen ZhuLiu nodded, eyes cold. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"So, you don't think they're alive?"

"If they are, they wish they weren't." Wen ZhuLiu said.

"I see." Lan SiZhui said quietly. "Still, would you mind telling me where they were last? If I can, I'd like to return their bodies to their family to be buried properly." Wen ZhuLiu didn't say anything for a long moment, then nodded.

"YiLing." This surprised Lan SiZhui, but also not. *Of course*, he thought to himself, *they would be where Wen Chao had told him not to look for them*. This information was more than helpful – knowing this, Lan SiZhui wouldn't need to search every place they have been held, but could only concentrate on one of them. While there was also a possibility that Wen



ZhuLiu was also lying, Lan SiZhui didn't find any reason he would be. He gained nothing if he deceived Lan SiZhui – other than cruelty, but from his tale, Lan SiZhui did not gather that Wen ZhuLiu was a cruel man just for the fun of it, rather someone who followed orders to satisfy the person he looked up to.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Lan SiZhui said respectfully.

“Lan SiZhui.” Wen ZhuLiu began and Lan SiZhui paused in the motion to get up to look at him curiously. “There is something strange about your spiritual energies. There had been before you fell into the Burial Mounds as well. Now, combined with the resentful energy lingering in your body, it feels unstable.” Lan SiZhui frowned. He hadn't noticed that.

“Do you know what is it?” Wen ZhuLiu shook his head.

“I am not an expert. But perhaps, you should have this looked after.”

“Why do you care?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows, puzzled.

“If your Golden Core cannot be crushed, perhaps you're the person who will kill me.” Wen ZhuLiu said too calmly for this topic. “When you do, I wish my death to be found in battle as it should be proper.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui watched him wide eyed, then stood. “Sir, I'm afraid it is time I put your restraints back and leave.”

At this, Wen ZhuLiu didn't say anything, just stood, stretched, then went over to the chair and sat, obediently bringing his hands behind his back, wrists crossed. Lan SiZhui secured the ropes by his best knowledge, then headed out.

Lan SiZhui was distracted as he left the rooms. The guard accompanied him until they reached the main buildings, but from there, he went to his own rooms without a second thought.

He had never really wished to know more about his birth Sect's history. While it was noticeable that many of his history lessons in the future brushed over these events without really going into detail about the Wen Sect, he was never bothered by it. Part of it had to do with the general opinion on the Wen Sect; even over a decade later the name Wen was not something favorable. Another part was his own ignorance about his heritage.

What Wen ZhuLiu had told him made him think of more than the present matters. There was an entirely different history in this time. Lan SiZhui grew up learning the bare minimum about the Wen Sect, and from Jin Ling he also knew other Sects were not different either. In his time, the Wen name was associated with evil acts and the Wen Sect could do no good.

This never bothered Lan SiZhui before, not even when he paid his respects to his Sect with the Ghost General – Wen Ning's stories about his family never felt like they were associated with the Wen Sect at all. While intellectually Lan SiZhui knew the Dafan branch was also part of the Wen Sect, he'd always felt this disconnection between the two. While this was

true, and the Dafan branch distanced themselves from the main family, it was undeniable that they were of the same Sect.

Lan SiZhui felt somewhat wronged by this all. Even if Wen RuoHan destroyed the reputation of the Sect, their history was still important, and other than Wen RuoHan's latest actions, the Wen Sect had not always been evil. Since he'd arrived to the past, he'd learned Wen Mao was the one to rid the world from Xue ChongHai, that Wen RuoHan, before the Yin Iron poisoned his mind, had helped several smaller Clans and cared for his people. Lan SiZhui felt it was unfair that in his time these deeds were completely ignored in favor to bash the name of the Wen Sect. He realized they weren't all the best people, but that shouldn't mean their entire history should be erased.

This was the first time Lan SiZhui felt somewhat like a Wen, like these were his people and his history that had been so altered by the generation before his. However, this was not the time to think such thoughts. Lan SiZhui had to concentrate on the present and be mad at his ancestors at a later date.

Lan SiZhui almost reached his rooms when someone stepped in his path and he stopped, looking up at Wei WuXian surprised. The other smiled at him and bowed.

"Lan SiZhui, I've been looking for you."

"Young Master Wei, what can I do for you?" Lan SiZhui blinked at him.

"I just wanted to take a stroll and you seemed like a good companion for it. You're not busy, are you?" Lan SiZhui had to think for a minute, trying to calculate what time it was, and how long did he have until he was due to dinner with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi. He still had a little time, so he smiled at Wei WuXian and gestured him to keep walking, leading them on a scenic route through the buildings.

Although Lan SiZhui doubted Wei WuXian truly just wanted to take a walk together, his mind was full with questions, so he didn't push the issue, letting Wei WuXian come out with his reasons on his own.

"Where have you been just now?" Wei WuXian brought up after a few minutes of quiet, proving Lan SiZhui's theory right.

"I was questioning Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu." Lan SiZhui answered, not seeing any reason to lie.

"How come you were allowed to talk to those two? When I tried to go there earlier, I was met with a barrier Sect Leader Lan put up." Wei WuXian pouted.

"I was allowed in." Lan SiZhui answered simply, not revealing he hadn't noticed any kind of barrier before.

"Even Uncle Jiang and ZeWu-Jun hadn't questioned them. Did they ask you to interrogate them?" Wei WuXian wondered.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I went for my own reasons.”

“Did you ask them about Wen Ning?” Wei WuXian stopped, turning to Lan SiZhui. The other sighed. This was most likely the topic Wei WuXian wanted to ask him about – at least one of them. Knowing his personality, Lan SiZhui was somewhat reluctant to answer, but in the end, Wei WuXian had every right to know.

“Yes. Neither gave a straight answer to my questions.”

“So, we still don’t know if he’s alive or not?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “Wen Chao revealed all the locations where he’d kept Wen Ning.”

“Ah, that’s good!” Wei WuXian beamed. “You know what, I’ll help you look for Wen Ning.”

“Ah, Young Master Wei... I don’t think it’s a good idea. Sect Leader Jiang would surely want you here.”

“Still, let me know when you go.” Wei WuXian nodded. “We made a pretty good team in the forest, didn’t we?” Lan SiZhui smiled at him and nodded. After this, they began walking again. They were quiet for a while, then Wei WuXian asked: “May I ask a question?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“It’s.... uh, it’s about your demonic cultivation.” Wei WuXian said awkwardly, and Lan SiZhui tensed. This must’ve been the real reason Wei WuXian wanted to talk to him about. “It’s not bad, I promise!” Wei WuXian held up his hands. “I’m just curious, that’s all.”

“Young Master Wei, this is...” Lan SiZhui trailed off, not knowing how to finish.

“Ah, I know it’s a dangerous cultivation. But I was just wondering. Would you mind stating my curiosity?” Wei WuXian looked at him from the corner of his eyes. Lan SiZhui sighed, knowing Wei WuXian would hardly accept a negative answer.

“Young Master Wei, it would be for the best if you didn’t inquire about this. People might misunderstand.”

“I’m not going to talk to people about it. I just want to ask you a few questions. You have the right not to answer, but I’m still going to ask.” He grinned. At this, Lan SiZhui sighed again and gave up, nodding. Wei WuXian beamed. “Can you really control fierce corpses with this method?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, already uncomfortable with the line of questioning.

“And does this harm you? Is that why you had to go to the healer?” Now his voice and expression were laced with worry. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“The only lingering energy left in my body is from my time spent in the Burial Mounds. This method I’m using does not require resentful energy flowing through me at all.”

“I see.” Wei WuXian hummed, thoughtful. “And say, you can only use it when you play the guqin?” This question Lan SiZhui found odd and he looked over questioningly. “I just mean, if you lost your guqin, could you use any other instrument?” Lan SiZhui paused, remembering Wei WuXian of the future with an improvised bamboo flute on Dafan Mountain and whistling in Guanyin temple. He shrugged.

“I would not know.”

“But in theory?” Wei WuXian probed.

“Perhaps.” Lan SiZhui answered.

“I see.” Wei WuXian hummed, rubbing his chin in thought. Lan SiZhui turned to him.

“Young Master Wei, this method is not only unethical, but also dangerous. I can do this because I’ve practiced for months. I have nearly died from trial and error, and I have an expertise in musical cultivation. If someone with less skill was to try this method, surely, they wouldn’t only infect themselves with resentful energy, but also put everyone close by in danger.”

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, you say this as if I intended to use this method. I’m just asking a few questions.” Wei WuXian rubbed the side of his nose, looking away. “Seriously, being so stern without a reason...”

“I just...” Lan SiZhui looked at him helplessly. “I have lost my adoptive father to his recklessness once. He didn’t heed the warnings and he died. Please, don’t make the same mistake.”

“Lan SiZhui, you say that as if you’re afraid of losing your father again, yet I am not your father.” Wei WuXian looked at him with humor. “You’re much older than me in fact.” Lan SiZhui, not knowing what to say to that, just sighed and nodded. They continued their way around the pathways, but apparently, Wei WuXian wasn’t done with his questions. “Lan SiZhui, this thing I carry with me,” Wei WuXian touched his belt, where a familiar qiankun pouch was dangling, “you know what it is, don’t you?”

Lan SiZhui hesitated, then remembered he’d already said so when he first saw the sword made of Yin Iron and nodded. “I do.”

“I think I also know what it is.” Wei WuXian nodded, as if Lan SiZhui just confirmed his suspicions. “If I’m right, shouldn’t we let Uncle Jiang or ZeWu-Jun know? After all, it was ZeWu-Jun who encouraged Lan Zhan to look for the shards. If I tell him I have one, he will know what to do with it.”

“It is best if nobody knows.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “The truth is, I hoped you wouldn’t realize. It is safer if you can be genuinely clueless. As long as you act no different than usual, nobody else should suspect you. I have recognized even back at the Xuanwu cave because I have come into contact with this thing several times, but others might not recognize this energy.”

“What do you mean you’ve made contact with it before?” Wei WuXian asked, surprised. Lan SiZhui only realized now that the Stygian Tiger Amulet he’d encountered was in the future and this time, Lan SiZhui, really never even saw a Yin Iron shard, much less touched one.

“Ah, it’s nothing.” Lan SiZhui said quickly. “Anyhow, if you don’t draw attention to it, nobody should know you have it.”

“I thought you might want to have it instead, or have me hand it to ZeWu-Jun.” Wei WuXian mentioned after a pause. “How come you do not want that?”

“It’s not that.” Lan SiZhui frowned. “It’s just that it is safer if it’s with you. As long as you can keep carrying it and nobody notes you have it, it should remain hidden. Wen Chao knows I know the thing’s location, so people will ask for it from me. If I have it, it will be easier for them to find it.”

“I see.” Wei WuXian hummed. After that, they didn’t talk much, and soon, they finished their walk. Lan SiZhui bid him goodnight, then headed towards the dormitories to join Jin Ling and Lan JingYi for dinner.

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“You’re saying Wen Ning and Wen Qing were in YiLing this whole time?” Lan JingYi frowned. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Wen Chao truly loves that place, doesn’t he?” Jin Ling sighed.

“He thinks the last Yin Iron shard is there. It makes sense.” Lan JingYi said. “The question is where are they though. Do you think they’ve also been tossed to the Burial Mounds?”

“I doubt it.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “If it happened while I was there, I’d have sensed it.”

“And if it happened after?” Jin Ling raised his eyebrows and Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, not knowing what to say to that.

“Wen Chao said he left them in the care of his men. Surely then, they’re still at the supervisory office.” Lan JingYi tried to reassure and Lan SiZhui nodded to him gratefully.

“Anyhow, going back there now...” Jin Ling frowned. “For the Wen of all people, surely, it’s not worth it.”

“Young Mistress, were they not the people who also saved you?” Lan JingYi glared at him. “You’re always the one who says he won’t be indebted to others. Shouldn’t you also be eager to save them to make sure they see your debt repaid? If for nothing else, do this for that.”

“Don’t try to tell me what to feel.” Jin Ling glared at him. “I said before I’ll help Lan SiZhui, so if he decides to go, of course I’ll go with him. But I’m not going to let him participate in a suicide mission for people he barely knows. Would you let him do that?!”

“Of course not. This is why we need to plan this mission carefully. Maybe even talk to Lan XiChen about it.”

“You truly became too close to him if you consider talking to him before we made plans.” Jin Ling glared.

“That’s enough.” Lan SiZhui warned them. They weren’t here to butt heads, so he tried to stir the conversation back on topic. “Jin Ling, if you don’t want to help, I understand.”

“Again, who said I’m not going to help?! Stop putting words in my mouth, both of you!” He snapped, slamming his hand on the table. There was a pause, then Jin Ling said: “It will not be easy to go there unnoticed.”

“That’s why I thought maybe I should go alone.” Lan SiZhui agreed. “If I put on different clothes, they won’t be able to spot me easily.”

“Would you stop?! We can’t put on a disguise now, or what?” Jin Ling scoffed. “We said we’re going with you, so we will. Stop trying to talk us out of it. Why are you trying so hard anyways?”

“When the YiLing Patriarch helped the Wen after the war, he was cast out and demonized.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. “What if it happens now as well?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “At Qiongqi Path, when Wei WuXian brought back the Ghost General, he massacred several Jin Sect soldiers. This was a bigger offense than helping the Wen. If we don’t harm our own, we could even take them back to our Sects and take them in as refugees.”

“They could do that?” Lan JingYi blinked, surprised.

“If they ask for asylum, then yeah.” Jin Ling said. “Many Wen did it at the beginning of Sunshot Campaign. Most fled to smaller Clans and not many to major Sects, but it is not unheard of. For example, the Jin Sect used to have several refugees taking shelter in Lanling during the war, then once it was over, they moved back to Qishan under a new name and an oath to not revive the Wen Sect nor help criminals of war.”

“I thought the Jin were the ones who promoted having all Wen killed in the first place.” Lan JingYi said. Jin Ling nodded.

“The refugees were mostly civilians. They had no political or military interest in the war and they fled in time, so their involvement or inaction was not considered an act of war, but anyone who stayed was considered an enemy because they haven’t officially taken a stand.”

“That still doesn’t sound fair.” Lan JingYi frowned. “If they didn’t do anything but simply didn’t want to be involved in any way, why would they be considered enemy?” Jin Ling shrugged.

“I can’t say I don’t agree with my grandfather on this. They had the chance to oppose the Wen Sect or at least remove themselves from the situation. Instead, they stayed and watched

as it played out then begged for mercy. Inaction is so annoying.” He huffed. “Make up your mind, are you going to help or not? If you just stand there and watch thousands being slaughtered and then say you couldn’t have done anything, you’re just as guilty.”

“I don’t agree.” Lan JingYi glared.

“Ah, let’s not get into this.” Lan SiZhui said. He didn’t have the energy to deal with more fights between them. “We should leave for YiLing soon.”

“And who would take us there?” Jin Ling asked. “Lan JingYi can only carry one person, and as cool my bow is, it cannot fly.”

“That being said, how would you fight? You shouldn’t use demonic cultivation so carelessly.” Lan JingYi added. “You remember what had happened to Wei WuXian – we do not want another bloodbath to happen.”

“I’m pretty sure that had little to do with his demonic cultivation.” Lan SiZhui told him. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“You get my point anyhow. We’ve agreed you’d use it to defeat Wen RuoHan, but don’t use it for everything.” He looked worried now. “Wen RuoHan had become infuriated with the power the Yin Iron provides him. It is dangerous to you as well. You might not notice, but resentful energy poisons the mind as much as the body.”

“And if you kill my father, I *will* kill you.” Jin Ling told him with a stern look. Lan JingYi looked over with a deadpan expression.

“Young Mistress, what reason would Lan SiZhui have to confront your father? Think before you speak.”

“You—!” Jin Ling glared at him, and Lan JingYi broke into chuckles. They bickered for a moment, then Lan SiZhui stopped them. “Anyhow, you get my point. You cannot fly a sword yet, so just heal up and then we can go.”

“Wei WuXian offered to come with.” Lan SiZhui mentioned. “He could take one of us.”

“I won’t go anywhere else with that lunatic! Haven’t it been enough that I spent the past several months with him and his family?!”

Lan SiZhui sighed. “Then we will go on foot.”

“SiZhui.” Lan JingYi said seriously, and at his tone, Lan SiZhui looked over. “Go into seclusion for a few days. Heal your Golden Core. Once you are able to fly a sword again, we can go.”

Lan SiZhui was quiet.

“He’s right.” Jin Ling said. “Besides, they have waited three months. It will not matter if they are left there for a few more days. If they’re dead, they will be dead then too.”

“How sensitive.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“And if they’re alive?” Lan SiZhui asked. “Wen Chao had been to YiLing when we captured him. We do not know if perhaps he left there saying he will return. If he doesn’t return, what will happen to them?”

“I’m sure they can hold on for a few more days.” Jin Ling huffed. “There must be a time limit how long Wen Chao can stay away.”

“Exactly. After this time is up, his men from the supervisory office, won’t they look for him? What happens to Wen Qing and Wen Ning if Wen Chao is believed dead?”

“You cannot assume they’ll just kill them.” Lan JingYi put a hand on his arm to capture Lan SiZhui’s attention. “While it is true Wen Qing is now considered a criminal, it is also true that she is Wen RuoHan’s doctor and protégé. Even if Wen Chao doesn’t return, would his men be willing to kill her so easily?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, seeing the logic in Lan JingYi’s words and grateful he’d brought it up. “I just don’t want to abandon them like this.”

“It is not abandoning them.” Lan JingYi said, sounding tired. “It is doing the smart thing and building up your strength, so when you go to free them, they will receive the best care they can get. It is no use for anyone to get yourself killed in the attempt to break them out.”

“Lan JingYi is, surprisingly, right.” Jin Ling ignored the offended ‘hey!’ from Lan JingYi. “You’re no use for anyone in this condition. Heal yourself and save them properly.”

Lan SiZhui hated to agree with them, but he knew they were right. He needed to have his strength back to save his cousins, and even though he had his demonic cultivation now, it didn’t mean he should use it so often.



This is how Lan SiZhui found himself the next morning gathering some necessities and heading towards the back mountains. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling accompanied him to a point, but then they stopped and told him:

“We’ll come get you in five days. Don’t rush it.” Lan JingYi said.

“We’ll inform the others where have you gone.” Jin Ling said. “So, don’t worry about that.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui bowed to them.

With that, he proceeded towards the Cold Pond cave. It was cold inside but thankfully, Lan SiZhui brought extra layers with him. It was good to have his Lan clothes back, although he got used to wearing the restricting clothes of the Wen and Jiang, this was still his own style.

At the platform where previously the white guqin of Lan Yi sat now was nothing. Lan SiZhui wondered where had it gone, did the Lan take it? However, he wasn’t here to play and he



even left Hudie at his rooms as well as his swords. He sat behind the platform, putting an incense burner on the platform.

The natural energies of the mountains were powerful and after so long in the Burial Grounds, it felt good to submerge himself in some positive energy. He breathed in deep, closing his eyes and concentrating inside himself. His Golden Core was still weak, although it felt stronger by the day, it was struggling and Lan SiZhui was hopeful some days in the Cold Pond Cave would help this.

As he began meditating, he couldn't help but think about Wen ZhuLiu's earlier words. Those hits he endured should've killed him. Maybe not right away but he'd have needed more time to recover according to Wen ZhuLiu. He didn't tell any of this to Lan JingYi and Jin Ling, feeling it safer if he didn't worry them about this as well, but internally, he was puzzled by this.

Wen ZhuLiu said there was something strange about his spiritual energies and he suspected this was also the reason why his Core couldn't be crushed, but as he felt out his meridians, he didn't feel anything different than his usual state. He suspected this also had something to do with their time travel, but he didn't know enough about this subject to tell for sure. He noted to himself to ask ZeWu-Jun about it later.

For now, he gave himself over to the energies of the mountains, letting it flow through him, cleanse and heal him. He just hoped by the time he was finished with it, he wouldn't be too late to save Wen Ning and Wen Qing.

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Five days had not felt so long. Lan SiZhui counted the days the best he could, and found that with each day his Golden Core had healed remarkably. It was like all it needed was the positive energies of the caves, and Lan SiZhui was endlessly grateful for Lan JingYi and Jin Ling for talking him into this, for already by the end of the third day he felt like his body had returned to normal completely.

On the fifth day he woke to the sounds of someone approaching and he opened his eyes, looking towards the entrance of the cave. Soon, two figures appeared in the tunnel that led in from the outside.

"... I'm not trying to be rude to him. It's just how my personality is." He heard Jin Ling's voice before he saw him.

"Maybe you should try to change it then." Lan JingYi answered.

"If I should change my personality at your command, why don't you change yours as well? Surely, every Lan is humiliated by your personality."

"At least I don't hate everyone I meet on sight. Is there even anyone you like?"

"This isn't the point." Jin Ling huffed. "Jiang FengMian is supposed to be a Sect Leader, yet he's constantly worrying about people irrelevant to him. He even praises Wei WuXian for

things others consider outrageous.”

“So, this is all because of Wei WuXian?”

“Of course, not! But he should watch what he’s doing more. Like now, he’s telling us to give his wishes to Lan SiZhui, while his Sect is still surrounded by the Wen. Shouldn’t he worry about himself more? At this rate, he will get himself killed trying to save others. What use is there for that? If you have people you care about, just stay alive to protect them.”

“You’re talking nonsense again.” At this point they appeared in the chamber. Jin Ling had his arms crossed while Lan JingYi was carrying a tray piled with food – presumably for all three of them, because surely, Lan SiZhui could not eat that much. “Sect Leader expressed he’d wanted to clean up Jiang jurisdiction, so of course, he cares about that.”

“I just don’t want my uncle to lose his father again to pointless things. Is that so bad?” Jin Ling said, annoyed.

“So, you’re just looking out for Sect Leader Jiang?”

“I’m not looking out for anyone. I just don’t get why people have to die a pointless death, leaving everyone else to deal with the aftermath. It’s so stupid.” Lan JingYi looked at Jin Ling for a long moment at this, then sighed, shook his head and headed towards Lan SiZhui.

“Ah, SiZhui!” He grinned. Jin Ling followed, still in a foul mood, but he shook it off as soon as they got close enough.

“Jin Ling, JingYi.” Lan SiZhui smiled at them. They settled down at the other side of the platform, Jin Ling pushing the incense burner to the side to make room for the tray.

“Here.” Jin Ling demanded, holding out his hand. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look, then Lan SiZhui gave him his hand. Jin Ling closed his eyes, checking his meridians, then nodded and let go.

“So, how is it?” Lan JingYi asked, looking between the two of them.

“It’s fully restored.” Lan SiZhui told them. “I feel much better.”

“See? We told you so.” Jin Ling nodded self-assuredly. “We figured you might be hungry, so we brought you some food.” He nodded towards the tray.

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui smiled at them, scooting closer to eat properly.

“Should we tell him now?” He heard Lan JingYi whisper and looked up and over at them. Jin Ling shook his head.

“Let’s eat first, then we’ll talk.” He said, reaching out and taking a bowl from the tray. Between the three of them, the food was quickly gone. Even though Lan SiZhui still felt somewhat hungry, he didn’t voice it, just looked over at his friends expectantly.

“So, what had happened?” Lan SiZhui asked, curious and anxious at the same time.

“We’ve talked to Lan XiChen.” Jin Ling said. “Don’t look at me like that, he told me to call him that.” Jin Ling scoffed, then shook his head, focusing on the matter at hand. “When we told him we intended to go to YiLing again, he said we should discuss it with Sect Leader Jiang. So, we did, which led to Sect Leader Jiang wanting to discuss it with Lan XiChen.” He rolled his eyes. “Honestly, the whole scene was comical. Now, I understand why my uncle hates diplomacy. Anyways, they came to the conclusion it would be best if we shouldn’t try to sneak in. Instead, they’ve decided to begin our campaign against the Wen with this move.”

“What do you mean?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“Lan XiChen said: ‘Why not just attack the Wen near Lotus Pier and work towards YiLing, drive them back to Qishan, so it is no longer dangerous to gather forces in Jiang jurisdiction? While we do this here in the south, the Nie Sect could counter their returning forces in the north and we could get rid of every headache all in one move. While we do this, it would also be easier to raid the YiLing supervisory office and save those imprisoned there.’” Lan JingYi added.

“Lan XiChen and Jiang FengMian questioned Wen Chao.” Jin Ling said. “As expected, all he did was to goad. Wen ZhuLiu didn’t even say a word. We told Lan XiChen that he was moving much faster than the original timeline suggested. He said it might be better, because right after winter, the Wen’s resources might be running low and this might be the best time to attack.”

“I think the biggest difference is that the Jiang Sect is also joining with a better force than originally.” Lan JingYi said. “The original war moved slow because they didn’t have many forces, but with half the Sect saved by you and the Sect Heads, and thanks to Wen Chao chasing you instead of hunting down runaway Jiang disciples, there’s many more soldiers this time around. Even if the Jin Sect doesn’t join, we might still win. Of course, despite that, we still notified the Jin Sect about this move.”

“Mn.” Jin Ling nodded. “If father receives the letter, I’m sure he’ll also help out the best he can.”

“You aren’t bothered by this?” Lan SiZhui asked, surprised.

“Why would I be?” Jin Ling shrugged. “He participated in the original war as well, besides, if he dies during the war, it will be a more honorable death.”

“Mm.” Lan SiZhui considered keeping quiet, but then caught Lan JingYi’s eyes and realized Jin Ling didn’t understand the implications and said: “If he dies during the war, then you won’t be born.” At this, Jin Ling looked at him with wide eyes. He paused for a moment, just staring, then turned to Lan JingYi.

“Is this true?”

“It’s true.” Lan JingYi nodded. “I thought it was obvious that is why I asked like three times if you were sure, but you kept snapping at me like usual.”

“Then you should’ve told me!” Jin Ling glared.

“As you said, he also participated in the original war. I assumed you were calm because you assumed he would survive no matter what this time around as well.”

“Well, I don’t think of things like that!” Jin Ling snapped, then held his head. “Now, we have to make sure he doesn’t die.”

“He is your father and you invited him.” Lan JingYi said. “This is your responsibility.”

“How arrogant.” Jin Ling glared at him.

“So, the Sunshot Campaign is truly starting then.” Lan SiZhui observed, to shift the focus away from the issue of Jin Ling’s father.

“But this also means we’ll only arrive to YiLing at a later date.” Lan JingYi added. “We’ve tried to explain it to Lan XiChen that this matter is time sensitive, but he wouldn’t hear about it. He said we shouldn’t go off on our own anymore.”

“Unless this has something to do with the outcome of the war, he said.” Jin Ling added.

“MouShi wanted to lie and say it did, but I thought you should decide before that.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Thank you for looking out for me though.” He told Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes and looked away.

Lan SiZhui thought for a minute, considering their options. He understood why Lan XiChen didn’t want them to go off on their own – in this matter, they did not have the best record. At the same time, he still wanted to hurry; after all, he still thought that without Wen Chao’s return, who knew what fate awaited Wen Qing and Wen Ning?

“With the Sect Leaders’ plan, do we know how soon would we arrive to YiLing?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“At most in two weeks. One more week is required to move the army, but they have been gathered these past few days, so it shouldn’t take too long. The only thing that we’re uncertain how long it will last are the actual fights – if the Wen doesn’t bend as quick as anticipated, we might get stuck fighting for weeks.” Lan JingYi said. This worried Lan SiZhui, and probably seeing that, Lan JingYi added: “But we suspect, perhaps if the Wen are too busy defending themselves from our attacks, then maybe they won’t have time to take revenge on Wen Qing and Wen Ning. Grandmaster Lan even thinks that without Wen Chao there to command them, many might even flee without needing to be attacked, which would quicken this process greatly.”

“That old man has surprisingly good points.” Jin Ling noted under his breath. Lan SiZhui repressed a smile and thought about this for another minute.

In the end, short of disobeying direct orders from his Sect Leader and putting not only himself but his friends’ lives in danger as well, he had no other choice. They would need to do this before they could free his cousins.

“Then that is what we will do.” He decided and saw the same determination on his friends’ faces.

They might not care about the Wen as Lan SiZhui did, but they cared about the war greatly. Joining and helping the Sunshot Campaign had been something they intended to do ever since they discovered they were in the past, and so, they were enthusiastic about this outcome. While Lan SiZhui was not fond of the thought of war, he also agreed that helping out was all they could do to save people, much like they’ve done during the battle at Lotus Pier. That turned out a success, so this might as well. Lan SiZhui just hoped they got to YiLing in time.

# Resentment I.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As promised, it took the Lan about a week to move from Gusu to the Lan-Jiang border. During this time Jiang FengMian returned home with Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian to mobilize their own forces, and so in a week the Sunshot Campaign officially began.

Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling did not join the front lines this time around. Lan XiChen did not want them near the battles for multiple reasons.

“Lan SiZhui just recovered from his injuries and should take it easy for a little more.” He said when he was asked about these reasons. “Young Master Jin, no offense, but you’re much too inexperienced in battles to fight yet. Even though you’ve accomplished plenty during the battles of Lotus Pier, I wouldn’t want to put you in the front lines before you’ve been properly trained.”

“I don’t need training, I’m perfectly capable of handling myself!” Jin Ling argued passionately.

“There’s more.” Lan XiChen added, ignoring the comment. “Young Master Jin also has a good eye for tactics and he could help in planning. Battles aren’t only fought on the battlefield and being a tactician is also a crucial role.”

“Just because Madam Yu gave me some stupid title, I don’t become good at strategy!” Jin Ling glared.

“It is not because of your title. Sect Leader Jiang was the one who recommended we also include you in the planning of the war. He thinks highly of your skills and says your ideas have saved him back in YiLing as well.”

“And JingYi?” Jin Ling frowned, his arms crossed over his chest. He was probably offended by the role he’d been put into, but he didn’t voice his hurt as loudly as usually, which led Lan SiZhui to believe he didn’t mind all that much anyways.

“I suspect the two of you would also feel better about staying if he also didn’t go.” Lan XiChen said.

“And I don’t have any experience on the battlefield.” Lan JingYi added. “I haven’t even trained for it like everyone else had been since the Sunshot Campaign had been decided. I’d rather practice a little before going out.”

“You don’t think you could handle it? Then why did you come?” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui warned him gently.

“I can handle it fine.” Lan JingYi told Jin Ling. “But I haven’t even been on a night-hunt in months. I need to get prepared. Just because you run into battle without thinking things through first, I’m not like that.”

“I don’t do that.” Jin Ling glared at him.

“Oh? Hadn’t Wei WuXian needed to rescue you on Dafan Mountain either? Or afterwards, at the Nie Sword hall?”

“That’s different!” Jin Ling argued. “We were on a night-hunt. Uncle was also there.” He paused. “Besides, haven’t I just been promoted as a tactician?”

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui warned his friend when he saw him taking a breath to argue. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes but dropped the topic.

“Anyways, if you need to practice, then just go and practice.” Jin Ling said arrogantly.

“Actually, all three of you should.” Lan XiChen said. “While Young Master Jin and Lan SiZhui had participated in battles before and won quite a few times, from what I’ve heard, your techniques could also be improved, for now you’re fighting people and not monsters.”

“We know that.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Who said we need to improve?”

“Do not fret, please. I have asked around.” Lan XiChen told them. “I have already made preparations to have someone train you with some other disciples. It is not much, but it would put my mind to ease if I knew you’ve been properly prepared for what’s to come.”

“I guess we don’t have any other choice since the Lan Sect Leader ordered us to do so.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“I believe this will benefit you.” Lan XiChen smiled, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “Lan SiZhui, thank you for being patient and waiting for us to gather our forces and begin the war. I know you must be anxious to free your cousins.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Sect Leader Jiang and I suspect we will reach YiLing within a week. If that is not the case, then you have my permission to go on a mission to save them, but beforehand, please, come see me.”

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui stood and bowed to him. Lan XiChen smiled.

“Now, after you’ve had your lunch, I’ll have someone get you and you can begin your training this afternoon.”

“Thank you, Sect Leader Lan.” The others stood and bowed as well, then they left Lan XiChen’s rooms to look for some lunch.

“Just who does he think he is?!” Jin Ling complained once they were out of hearing range. “Telling me all this, like he himself isn’t the same age as the two of you, or as if Jiang Cheng

isn't also the same age as me. Why does he have more combat training than I do?! I participated in more battles than he had!"

"I think he's just being cautious." Lan JingYi said. "Everything he said was true. As to your skills, didn't Jiang WanYin practice since they've arrived to Meishan? During that time, you were sulking over Lan SiZhui, too busy to do the same. And since you're also from the same time as us, I think he sees you as one of us. Jiang WanYin is Sect Leader Jiang's son – Lan XiChen has hardly any way to prevent him from fighting."

"I'm not one of you though." Jin Ling said. "Nor am I a Jiang. Who's here to tell me what to do?"

"I'm sure if you were to bring that up, Lan XiChen would've apologized and said to do whatever you like. So, why didn't you?" Lan JingYi cocked an arrogant eyebrow.

"One of these days, I'll truly break your legs!" Jin Ling told him, then quickened his pace. Lan JingYi laughed and jogged to catch up. Lan SiZhui smiled at their antics and also followed closely.



The Lan instructor they were assigned to was an older disciple Lan SiZhui hadn't recognized. He introduced himself as Lan ZhiHao. They began their training that afternoon, along with some other, younger disciples, who were only a year or so younger than Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui. By far, Jin Ling was the youngest there.

From that day on, their life fell into a routine. While the Sunshot Campaign moved forward, they actually stayed at the border. They were to follow Lan XiChen and the army once they've pronounced an area completely safe or required assistance. This haven't happened until the fifth day, then Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui helped the disciples and leftover soldiers move the camp.

Lan SiZhui was anxious – they were still far from YiLing and even though their joined effort was more than effective, the Sects moved slowly. It was just as well, on the seventh day Lan XiChen called for them once again while they were having breakfast.

"This is it then." Jin Ling said, still chewing on his last bite. Lan JingYi frowned at him.

"Should we get our things then?" Lan JingYi asked.

"Why rush? We have all day." Jin Ling shrugged, finally swallowing.

"It's enough to look at Lan SiZhui's face and you know why rush." Lan JingYi pointed out. As the two of them looked over, Lan SiZhui felt his face heat in embarrassment.

"Well then." Jin Ling huffed, then stood and stretched. "I'll go, get my bow. We'll meet at ZeWu-Jun's rooms."

"Mn."



Ten minutes later they had, then entered together, bowing to Lan XiChen and surprisingly, Jiang FengMian and Jin ZiXuan as well. Jin Ling's eyes widened, then narrowed and his shoulders tensed as his hand gripped the bow so hard it creaked.

"Boys, come in." Lan XiChen urged them, and Lan JingYi gently pushed on Jin Ling's back to get him moving. Once the door closed behind them, Lan XiChen cast a silencing spell. "Young Master Jin arrived just now. Excuse me for not informing you in time, Jin Ling."

"It's fine." Jin Ling waved his hand. Jin ZiXuan looked him up and down in a judging manner. Jin Ling frowned back at him.

"As you might've guessed, this is about your mission to YiLing." Lan XiChen began, but before he could say it all, Jin Ling interrupted.

"He cannot come!" He said, pointing at his father. At this, Jin ZiXuan's eyebrow twitched.

"Young Master Jin will not accompany you." Lan XiChen placated. "But since he is here and you are a Jin disciple, he ought to know where you go."

"Well, I'll go even if he forbids it!" Jin Ling said next crossing his arms across his chest.

"What's with you? He hadn't even said a word." Lan JingYi muttered under his breath. Jin Ling ignored him.

"He is not forbidding you from going." Lan XiChen said patiently. "He is here to learn about the mission, so he knows where you are in case you get lost. As a Jin disciple, it is his responsibility to make sure you return home once this is over."

There was an awkward pause, then Jin Ling raised his chin. "Good." Lan JingYi sighed, holding his head. Lan SiZhui agreed, Jin Ling was truly too dramatic this time.

"To the matter at hand," Lan XiChen continued, clearing his throat, "I suspect Wen Qing and Wen Ning are being held in the supervisory office. Since we won't be there to offer backup forces, make sure you do not alert the soldiers in YiLing. The best would be if you'd be able to sneak in and out unnoticed. If that is not possible, then I suggest you look for the supervisor. If you capture them, the Wen soldiers will be more careful. Preferably, if that's the case, try to bring the supervisor back with you as well as Wen Qing and Wen Ning. If you run into any trouble, then send up a flare signal and Young Master Jin's and some Jiang and Lan disciples we can spare will go to help out."

"We can handle it alone. We have been for a while." Jin Ling said.

"But you don't have to anymore." Lan XiChen told him with a significant look. Jin Ling's face turned red.

"Thanks to ZeWu-Jun for the advice and the help." Lan SiZhui bowed to him. Lan XiChen smiled.

"Be careful. I do not want any of you to get hurt doing this. If you need help, do not hesitate to ask for it."

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” The two Lan echoed. Jin Ling rolled his eyes but also bowed.

“It’s best if you depart now. I suspect you’ll arrive by tonight. We’ll be looking for your signal. If everything goes well, we expect you back in four days. If you do not return by then, we will send people to look for you.”

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” The three of them bowed again, then once they were dismissed, they left the room. Jin Ling sighed.

“For him to give us instructions, he really thinks too much of himself.”

“You’re impossible.” Lan JingYi shook his head. Lan SiZhui sighed, smiling internally.

“So, we’re going in the end.” Jin Ling changed the topic. “What is the plan?”

“Can we disguise ourselves like you did last time?” Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling made a face at that and Lan SiZhui agreed this time.

“I doubt they will fall for it a second time, but it’s not impossible. In any case, we should make another plan.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed. “Let us discuss it on our way.” He said, anxious to get going. Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but also agreed, and so, the three of them jumped on their swords, Lan JingYi carrying Jin Ling, and set off towards YiLing.



It was dark by the time they arrived. They didn’t bother going into the town at all, landing near the supervisory office to avoid any guards noticing them before it was time. Their plan went like this: Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi would use the cover of the night to conceal their faces somewhat. They changed into red clothes to make themselves look like Wen disciples, this is how they would sneak in, simply ask for entrance.

Lan SiZhui felt almost comfortable in the Wen clothes he had on. He got so used to them in the Burial Mounds, he was glad he took them with him and washed them to use later, he kept them in his qiankun pouch, since he didn’t wish to showcase it to others in his rooms. This proved useful now.

Lan JingYi was wearing simple, bright red robes, ones they’ve brought a few towns over. It was more similar in style to the Lan robes, so he also looked comfortable in them. Side-by-side, they looked like two young disciples out on a stroll. Lan SiZhui even had Feixu on him, though Zhameng on Lan JingYi’s back was wrapped in a black cloth, so it didn’t give away his identity, but still showed he was armed.

Even if they had to fight their way in, they could easily access their weapons this way, but if they could get in without a fight, this way nobody would realize they had Lan weapons on them.

“Are you sure this will work?” Jin Ling frowned. “I can easily recognize you, even in these clothes and without your forehead ribbons.”

“That’s you.” Lan JingYi shrugged. “The guards at the supervisory office don’t know our faces.”

“Perhaps not yours.” Jin Ling said. “Even mine could pass, but Lan SiZhui is a wanted criminal.”

“They will not look so closely.” Lan JingYi said. “Or do you know the Wen as cautious people?”

“Who knows what their orders are – maybe they have to take a good look at everyone.” Jin Ling clicked his tongue. “I still don’t understand why Lan SiZhui has to go but I have to stay.”

“Where would you hide your bow?” Lan JingYi cocked an eyebrow.

“I can leave it behind.” Jin Ling said defiantly.

“What will you fight with then?” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “Just stay behind, what’s this fuss about?”

“I know the office better than you; it just makes more sense that I go.”

“Not to me.”

“Alright, that’s enough.” Lan SiZhui said before they could get started. “We have all agreed on the plan. Let us just go and see if it works. If it doesn’t, there’s still Jin Ling’s idea.”

“Jin Ling’s idea is to kill everyone.” Lan JingYi said, deadpan. “Lan XiChen said, if we can, bring back prisoners. And surely, a fight wouldn’t go unnoticed to the people in the city.”

“It is the best we’ve got.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Let us go.”

After some walk in the forest, they arrived behind a big rock that would hide them from the eyes of the guards but would still let them see. It was dark, quiet and peaceful in the forest at this time, not much activity all around. The air carried the sounds of talk in the buildings and crickets chirping. Lan SiZhui would feel at peace if it wasn’t for what they were about to do. Even though he said he was alright with the plan, he was still nervous. He desperately wanted Wen Ning and Wen Qing to be alive and he also didn’t want to put his friends in this kind of danger.

“There’s not many guards.” Lan JingYi noted.

“We shouldn’t have bothered with these.” Jin Ling picked at Lan JingYi’s robes. “I say we kill these guards and go in. Nobody would stop us.”

“Except they can easily call reinforcements.” Lan SiZhui said, shaking his head. “No, we should do as we’ve planned.”

“Fine. But be careful.” Jin Ling said, frowning. “I don’t like how calm it is.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Lan JingYi wondered aloud.

“I just have a bad feeling.” Jin Ling shook his head, gripping his bow tightly. “I will not hesitate to come to your aid at the first sign of trouble, so don’t be rash.” He said.

“We will be fine.” Lan SiZhui tried to reassure him.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling snorted, then turned and disappeared into the woods. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look, then Lan JingYi shrugged.

“It can’t be helped.” He said. “His uncle is Sect Leader Jiang.”

“Don’t badmouth a Sect Leader, please.” Lan SiZhui told him. Lan JingYi just shrugged again. Lan SiZhui turned back to watch the entrance. “Should we go now?”

“Wait, something is happening.” Lan JingYi leaned forward. He was right, the guards seemed restless. A few minutes had passed with them pacing and looking impatient, then light of lanterns appeared behind them. “Who goes out this late at night?” Lan JingYi whispered.

“Nobody, watch.” Lan SiZhui said, gesturing at the scene. Two guards appeared, carrying lanterns. At this, the other two turned. They exchanged a few words, then bowed to each other. After this, the two guards who had been previously there, proceeded to go inside, leaving the two new guards outside – this was good, they managed to catch a change of watch. Nobody would come for a while.

They approached the office leisurely, but inside, Lan SiZhui wished they had Jin Ling as well, so he would easily lie to the guards. Nor he nor Lan JingYi – for all his mischief, he was an honest person – were particularly good at deception.

As they got closer, Lan SiZhui felt his palms getting sweaty and he clenched his hands in fists. When they got close enough, as they expected, the guards turned towards them. There were only two guarding the gates. In the cold evening air, they didn’t seem overly threatening.

“Brothers.” Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed to them. The Wen nodded in their direction.

“Brothers, what are you doing here?” One of them asked.

“We were hoping we could come in.” Lan SiZhui said. “We have been stationed near Yunmeng, but lately the Jiang Sect and the Lan Sect had begun to fight us, and our seniors sent us away to be safe.”

“Fleeing from battle, aren’t you ashamed?” One of the guards scoffed.

“Our elders ordered us, what did you want us to do?” Lan JingYi looked at the guard with wide eyes. Lan SiZhui hoped the guards were not as sharp and didn’t notice how Lan JingYi’s lines sounded practiced and well-considered. Lan SiZhui wondered how he never noticed just how bad Lan JingYi was at lying.

“Anyways, can’t come in.” The guard said, rolling his eyes. “Young Master Wen’s orders.”

“Young Master Wen is here?” Lan JingYi asked, sounding overly dramatic. Lan SiZhui secretly wished it was Jin Ling with him – even his irritative nature was better than Lan JingYi’s acting. His eyes were bulging, mouth hanging open. If Jin Ling would be there to describe him, he would say Lan JingYi looked like an idiot, and Lan SiZhui wouldn’t be able to disagree.

“Not currently, but this is where he stays, yes.” The guard said. “So, scram, don’t disturb Young Master Wen or his men.”

“May I ask where he is now?” Lan SiZhui asked, eager to learn what they’ve figured out about Wen Chao’s disappearance so far.

“Boy, it is none of your business.” The guard made a long-suffering face. “Why don’t you just go to an inn? There’s one in town.”

“Ah, we just hoped we would be able to stay with our Sect.” Lan JingYi said.

“When Young Master Wen returns, he can decide to let you stay or not. Until then, go away.” The guard said. Lan SiZhui looked over at the other, who was watching them with narrowed eyes. Lan SiZhui quickly looked away, not wanting the guard to recognize his face.

“Perhaps, you could ask whoever is in charge while Young Master Wen is gone if we could stay?” Lan JingYi asked with a frown.

“Why are you so set on staying here?” The other guard, who was studying them, asked. Lan SiZhui felt his heartbeat increase at this. “Is there something you don’t tell us?”

“Uh.” Lan JingYi looked back at him with wide, startled eyes. Lan SiZhui’s muscles tensed. They weren’t prepared for this, he didn’t know what else to do.

Before he or Lan JingYi could come up with something, there was a swishing noise beside Lan SiZhui’s ear and a soft thud. He didn’t even realize what happened when another whoosh passed them and another soft thud. Moments later, the two guards collapsed right in front of them, like sacks of potatoes. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi instructively pulled out their swords and stepped back, eyes wide, looking for the source of danger until he noticed the red-feathered arrows sticking out from the men’s neck.

This made him irrationally angry. He knew Jin Ling didn’t like to wait, knew the other boy’s temper wouldn’t let him watch the scene for long. Still, this implied Jin Ling didn’t trust them to do the job of getting inside. Lan SiZhui didn’t usually take these insults personally, for he knew the other boy well by now and knew his personality was like this, but looking at the bodies slowly bleeding out, he felt angry.

“What the hell?” Lan JingYi hissed next to him, turning to look into the direction they came from. Lan SiZhui also turned and a few moments later watched as Jin Ling emerged from between the trees, his golden robes swaying as he walked towards them. His face was set in a deep frown as he approached.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui glared, and Jin Ling looked surprised at him as he got closer. “This was unnecessary. We could’ve convinced them.”

“Didn’t I say I’ll attack at first sight of trouble?” Jin Ling frowned back at him. “Why are you mad?”

“You killed them without reason.” Lan SiZhui said. “That is not how we do things, Jin Ling!” He tried to keep his voice down, but the combination of the anxiety that still lingered from having to lie and his anger made him tremble with nerves.

“Without reason?” Jin Ling scoffed. “What do you take me for, the YiLing Patriarch? He was reaching for his weapon. He half-drew it before I shot him.” He gestured at the first guard he killed. This made Lan SiZhui pause and looked back at the guard. As Jin Ling said, in his hand was the hilt of his sword, the blade almost completely out of its sheath.

He had no idea how he didn’t notice. He could only blame his nerves and distraction. He looked over at Lan JingYi to see if he was similarly confused and saw he was, too. They shared a look, then Lan SiZhui immediately felt bad for his earlier anger.

“Jin Ling—” He began, turning back towards the boy, who rolled his eyes.

“Let’s move them before someone comes by. If they don’t see anyone, they’ll just assume they are slacking.” He said, his voice somewhat strained, like he was trying to keep his insults to himself. Lan SiZhui thought he deserved some reprimand, but Jin Ling completely ignored him as he and Lan JingYi took hold of one of the guards’ hands and pulled him away from the gates. Lan SiZhui promised himself to apologize at an appropriate time, then helped moving the second guard.

“Okay, now what?” Lan JingYi asked as they looked inside from the gates. Jin Ling huffed.

“Just go inside and act as if you were let inside. I’ll stay here and keep watch. Pay more attention from here on, if I lose sight of you, I won’t be able to look out for threats.”

“Where were you hiding anyways? There’s no shelter near from where you’d have seen the blade.” Lan JingYi frowned at him.

“Is this the best time?” Jin Ling glared, then gestured at a direction where he went earlier when they first parted. “I climbed on a tree. I saw his blade catch light from up there.” He said with a shrug, then nodded towards the inner buildings. “Go.”

“Ah,” Lan SiZhui paused, turning towards Lan JingYi. “JingYi, give me your qiankun pouch.”

“Why?” Lan JingYi asked confused, even as he handed said item over without hesitation. Lan SiZhui opened it and rummaged until he found what he was looking for, then handed a bundle of talismans to Jin Ling.

“What’s this?” Jin Ling frowned.

“Numbing talismans enhanced. If applied to a person, it will render them motionless for an hour.” Lan JingYi told him. “Why are you giving it to him?” He asked Lan SiZhui.

“There’s no need to kill everyone that approaches.” Lan SiZhui said, looking at Jin Ling earnestly. He rolled his eyes, but took the talismans, hiding them in the folds of his clothes.

“There, I’ll try to not to kill more people. Pleased? Go, let me know if you need help.”

“We’ll be back soon.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then with Lan JingYi, they headed inside. Lan SiZhui recognized the courtyard he’d been at before, the sight familiar by now.

The buildings were scattered around loosely in this area. He knew not many guards lived here, for this was mainly the servants’ place to sleep, other than the guest rooms to the side. There was a neat row of buildings framing the courtyard, where guards on watch were living. Behind there was the place where more staff stayed, though Lan SiZhui wasn’t clear on specifics. He knew that behind there was Wen Qing’s quarters. Logically, they would look there first, but Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure that’s where they would be kept as prisoners.

“Where should we look first?” Lan JingYi also asked as they were walking through the courtyard, feeling exposed even in the dark of the night. Lan SiZhui nodded towards the inner buildings and Lan JingYi nodded his agreement. They walked at a steady pace, trying not to look suspicious in case anyone was watching. Soon, they found out they were being watched. They just passed the first row of buildings when someone called out from the side.

“Who goes there?”

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look, then Lan SiZhui turned towards the sound. He saw there was a guard standing watch at the rooms, sitting on a highchair with a table next to him, on which there was a lantern, illuminating the guard’s face.

“We’re just returning to our rooms!” Lan SiZhui called back, hoping this would work. The guard didn’t say anything for a minute, then he stood and picked up the lantern, heading towards them. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared yet another look. Lan SiZhui saw the other reach into his sleeve and caught a glimpse of a numbing talisman he gripped, but yet to pull out. Lan SiZhui gave him a look that hopefully signaled him to wait.

The guard got close enough to illuminate them with the lantern as well.

“I asked who was it.” He said, squinting at them. Lan SiZhui bowed.

“We’re staying here for the time being.” He said instead of an answer, hoping the guard will not question them further.

“What’s that in your hand?” The guard asked, narrowing his eyes at Lan JingYi’s hand still in his sleeve. Lan JingYi looked over at Lan SiZhui, then pulled out the talisman, showing it to the guard. Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened; what was Lan JingYi thinking?!

“See it for yourself.” Lan JingYi said. The guard frowned at them and reached for the talisman. As he held it up to his face to study the spell written on it, Lan JingYi released a

small bust of spiritual energy, activating the talisman. Lan SiZhui froze, holding his breath. But the talisman worked, it became obvious as even after a minute the guard didn't move. Lan JingYi reached out and waved his hand in front of his face. The guard didn't even blink.

"Where did you learn this?" Lan SiZhui asked quietly.

"ZeWu-Jun taught it to me." Lan JingYi grinned at him, then carefully pried the lantern from the guard's hand. "Let's go."

They headed deeper into the supervisory office. Lan SiZhui felt the place, while was familiar from the time he spent here, it was also a little scary at night, while they were trying to not get caught. He wondered how Jin Ling was doing at the gates, if he was already too impatient. He shook his head to concentrate on the task at hand.

They rounded a corner and finally glimpsed at the gates leading to Wen Qing's private quarters. There were two guards posing in front of the gates leading there and Lan SiZhui held out a hand to halt Lan JingYi as well.

"Here." He said quietly, then went over to one of the rooms and sat down in front of it. Lan JingYi, although visibly confused, also followed his example, sitting and putting the lantern between them.

"What?" He asked quietly. "Are you alright? If you're in pain—"

"I'm fine." Lan SiZhui was quick to reassure. "I just didn't want to look suspicious – with this lantern, they could tell we were coming." He said, inclining his head towards the guards. Both looked more ready to defend the gates than the ones in front of the office had looked. They were turned towards the two of them, their hands on their hilts.

"How should we proceed?" Lan JingYi asked, looking away from the guards.

"Perhaps I could... Distract them?" Lan SiZhui asked, although he knew Lan JingYi would not agree, he still felt like he had to offer the option.

"How?" Lan JingYi, as expected, was suspicious.

"If they were busy fending off resentful energy..." Lan SiZhui began.

"Absolutely not." Lan JingYi glared at him. "We've talked about this, SiZhui."

"It was just an idea." Lan SiZhui told him, shrugging and looking around. Something caught his eyes and after a pause, he said: "Then how about this, how about we just climb over the wall over there?" He pointed at one part of the wall that was partially hidden by bushes from the guards' view.

"Why wasn't this your first suggestion?" Lan JingYi also looked over.

"Because I just now noticed it." Lan JingYi blinked at him, eyes wide. Lan SiZhui huffed. "Anyways, this way, we can sneak in."



“I’m good at sneaking.” Lan JingYi told him with a grin. Lan SiZhui refrained from rolling his eyes and patted his friend on the shoulder.

“I know.” He said. “Let us go then.”

“Mn.”

They left the lantern where they previously put it to give the illusion they were still in front of the building, not moving around. Rushing away while the guards weren’t looking, they reached the tree quickly. Seeing it was half-leaning onto the wall, Lan SiZhui was now positive they wouldn’t notice them climbing over from the gate, but there was no telling what was waiting for them on the other side, so they had to be careful.

Lan JingYi was the first to climb over the wall. He used the branches of the trees as much as Lan SiZhui’s shoulders to first just peek over it, seeing if anyone waited for them on the other side. Once he confirmed that nobody was looking at them, he threw his leg over the wall. As he was lying on his belly on top of the wall, astride, he reached down, offering his hand to Lan SiZhui. The other boy also used the tree for purchase, then as soon as he could reach it, he also took Lan JingYi’s hand and let the other pull him up.

Once they were over the wall, they had to hide immediately. There were guards patrolling inside, walking right past where they were hiding behind some bushes and trees. As the guards passed, Lan JingYi whispered so quiet, Lan SiZhui almost didn’t even hear him:

“It’s a good thing we’ve changed into these red clothes; otherwise, we would make really bad spies.”

“Where do you think the prisoners are being held?” Lan SiZhui wondered aloud, looking around. There was nothing peculiar here.

The buildings looked the same as Lan SiZhui remembered them from when he was here, and there was no obvious place where prisoners should be. There were mostly little cabins, not unlike outside these gates in the rest of the supervisory office, poor, one-room houses. There were two buildings that stood out from this: One was two stories, long and narrow, near the back entrance. If Lan SiZhui had to guess, this was where the head of the supervisory office stayed. The other was a tower-like building to the side, its purpose unknown, though if Lan SiZhui had to guess, its shape reminded him that of the Mingshi’s, therefore he assumed the building’s function to be similar as well.

“I’d say in this one.” Lan JingYi said, pointing at what Lan SiZhui assumed would be the supervisor’s residence. “If not one of the smaller buildings, but I assume then guards would pose in front of them for safety, and other than the patrols and those in front of this building, I can’t see more.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, agreeing with the suggestion. He looked out from between the branches. “The patrol passed now; I feel it’ll be a few more minutes until they return. Let us hurry.”

“Okay.” Lan JingYi took the instructions well, and in a matter of a few seconds they were already at the first building they hid behind to remain unseen.

Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui let out a collective sigh of relief at not being discovered, then moved on to the next building. They proceeded in this fashion for a few more minutes, then they must’ve gotten sloppy and careless, for in the moment between two buildings, they were seen. Lan SiZhui didn’t know if he was supposed to look out for guards or Lan JingYi was, but neither noticed this one as they snuck around. Not that it mattered. As they were running across the blank space between buildings, from their very left side a voice sounded suddenly, and as they reached the buildings, they knew it didn’t really matter to remain hidden anymore.

“Who goes there?!” The voice exclaimed.

“Shit.” Lan JingYi hissed. Lan SiZhui didn’t have time to complain about it though, because in the next moment, running footsteps neared them.

“Quickly, hide!” Lan SiZhui whispered to Lan JingYi.

“Where? They know we’re here.”

“Just go!” Lan SiZhui told him impatiently. Lan JingYi made a frustrated sound, then with a leap, he jumped on the roof, in the shadows so he wasn’t obviously visible. Lan SiZhui followed him, hoping his logic didn’t fail him. If he was right, the man saw two moving forms in the dark, and if he found nothing where they were supposed to be, he’d think it was just a flicker of his imagination.

This was obviously not the right idea, as moments later, someone called out: “They’re on the roof!”

“And now?!” Lan JingYi asked as they were forced to jump to the next building, to avoid their pursuers.

“Now, we fight.” Lan SiZhui said in a dark tone. As they were still fleeing, it took both of them a moment to get out their swords. Zhameng’s greenish sword glare shined and soon, Feixu’s grey joined it. There were about ten guards to each of them. Lan SiZhui was actually a little experienced in fighting multiple enemies at once from when he fought the battles of Cloud Recesses and Lotus Pier, but he was afraid Lan JingYi didn’t have that same experience.

He finished off five of his share of the guards in quick succession, but the other five proved to be harder to beat. They came from all directions, always, and Lan SiZhui didn’t have even a moment to stop. He fought with more and more anxiety, having a hard time keeping up.

“It’s Huangfeng!” Someone explained. Lan SiZhui was confused what kind of wasp they were talking about. Then, he saw a flash of yellow from the corner of his eyes and saw one of Lan JingYi’s opponents fall off the roof, dead with an arrow through his heart.

“MouShi is truly a master of the bow!” Lan JingYi called out. Lan SiZhui heard from afar:

“Shut the fuck up!”

Lan SiZhui didn't pay them any more attention as he was advanced again by the Wen guards. Before he knew it, there were even more, and many lanterns were lit in the supervisory office, flooding it with light. This was bad, Lan SiZhui thought, they should've just gone with his original idea and used resentful energy as distraction. It was too late to feel regret over this though, and all he could do was to try his hardest to keep up. Soon, a bright flash painted the entire sky above the supervisory office yellow. Lan SiZhui looked up along with many of his pursuers, to see what this was and saw the last traces of a yellow Jin signal flare disappear. Jin Ling had called for assistance.

“JingYi, fall back!” Lan SiZhui called out, breaking away from his own enemies, heading to where Jin Ling sent the flare from. With a frustrated cry, Lan JingYi also joined him, and soon, they saw Jin Ling on top of a roof, engaged in combat. He had a soldier straining his sword against his bow, the bow being held above his head. As the two Lan arrived, Jin Ling kicked the man in the stomach with a cry, then pulled out an arrow and without drawing his bow fully, released it straight into his head. From this far, it didn't take that much force to do so, and Lan SiZhui was mildly impressed.

“Asshole.” Jin Ling muttered, then looked up at them.

“Thank you for earlier.” Lan SiZhui said.

“Don't waste time with this, let's just go.” No sooner than he said this, another person landed on the roof. Lan SiZhui turned around, Feixu raised to cut the soldier down. What he saw behind him shocked him motionless though; around forty men surrounded them.

“There's not even room for them here, where did they come from?” Lan JingYi pressed through clenched teeth. He inched closer to Lan SiZhui, so their shoulders touched as the men circled them. Soon, they felt someone else lean against their back as well, Jin Ling's shoulders tense as he stood back-to-back with them.

“You're the one wielding Feixu.” The Wen soldier standing in the front of the group said, looking him up and down. “They say you're an exceptional master of the six arts and talented, you even survived the YiLing Burial Mounds I see. I have to say, I expected a seasoned warrior, not a mere boy.” He sneered. Lan SiZhui's grip on his sword tightened.

“Sir, I'm not responsible for these rumors. If you are disappointed, it's not on me.” Lan SiZhui said, trying to stall, hoping their help will come soon. It was unlikely, and he already resigned himself to his fate, but it didn't hurt to gain some time, so hopefully, they'll be able to fend them off until Lan XiChen's help arrived.

“Still.” The man hummed. “This is quite interesting. However, I am more puzzled by something else.”

“What would it be?” Lan SiZhui asked when there was a pause. Lan JingYi leaned closer and whispered:

“Is this really the best time to chat?”

“I am puzzled, because the last I heard, your so-called Sunshot Campaign was still just getting rid of our forces in Yunmeng’s area, instead of so far ahead in YiLing. This makes me wonder what the three of you are doing here. If you’re not with the Campaign, you’re either stupid enough to believe you can take down our supervisory office or you want something personally. I suspect the latter is true, so I’m asking: what are you here for?”

“We apologize for the intrusion.” Lan SiZhui said, bowing.

“Are you kidding me—is he saluting?!” He heard Jin Ling exclaim behind himself.

“So polite and refined; this criminal truly doesn’t live up to the expectations.” The soldier smirked, then prompted: “While your manners flatter me, I’m still asking: what are you here for?”

Lan SiZhui hesitated, but then he replied: “Sir, you guessed right, we are indeed here for selfish reasons.”

“What would it be?” The man asked when Lan SiZhui didn’t continue.

“If you’ve heard of me, you know before I was thrown into the Burial Mounds, I had also stayed here for a little while.”

The man nodded, seemingly recalling the events. “I know.”

“Then you also must know the current head of the Supervisory office helped me. She was kind to help me out and I wished to repay this debt to her, except I heard lately that she’d been imprisoned. I figured this would be a good way to repay her, so I came with my peers to free her.”

The man hummed thoughtfully, beginning to pace. “I see, I see. I’m afraid, despite your reputation though, you haven’t thought this through properly.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui looked around them pointedly, surrounded by Wen soldiers.

“And your peers also seem foolish.” The man continued. “When they shot up the signal flare, it was seen from afar; even us, from YiLing could see it and rushed here.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, not blaming Jin Ling for shooting up the signal flare, but still feeling frustrated. Perhaps if he hadn’t, they would’ve gotten away with just dealing with those in the supervisory office and wouldn’t be in this tight situation now.

No sooner than he had this thought, an arrow shot through the night and a soldier at the man’s side fell, clutching his neck where the arrow embedded. Lan SiZhui and his friends were quick to move as well, sensing their help had arrived, though it felt sudden, it wasn’t unwelcome. Soon, all of them were engaged in battle once more.

Lan SiZhui killed four or so soldiers, then he glanced over to his friends, see how they did, only to come face-to-face with Jin ZiXuan, the Jin Sect Heir’s sword passing his face, brushing his loose locks with the breeze of Jin ZiXuan’s momentum. Lan SiZhui’s eyes

widened, coming so close with the other man, who was looking over his shoulder. As Lan SiZhui turned, he saw a soldier impaled on Suihua.

“Have you seen their leader?” Jin ZiXuan asked as he pulled back. Lan SiZhui nodded, looking around, then pointed at Jin Ling, who was fending off the soldier’s attacks with his bow. “Keep fighting, I’ll take care of it.” Jin ZiXuan said, then with a leap, he was over at his son’s side, evading an upcoming attack towards him with his sword.

Lan SiZhui wondered what the Young Master himself was doing here; Lan XiChen said only his men would come. However, he couldn’t think about this for long, for the next attack came from his side.

It didn’t take long after that to kill or otherwise injure the soldiers who were surrounding them. Soon, Lan SiZhui found himself being one of the few remaining standing. There were about twenty people next to him, in various colored robes; he saw lavender MeishanYu, golden Jin and white Lan robes as well, though the golden robed people were in bigger numbers.

Lan JingYi joined his side, and soon, they saw Jin ZiXuan and Jin Ling approaching, with the leader of the soldiers stumbling in front of them, his hands tied behind his back.

“Are you alright?” Lan SiZhui asked Jin Ling when he saw his frown. The supervisory office was still lit up, and even though the light of the lanterns was faint on the roof, they could still make out each other’s faces.

“Fine.” Jin Ling grunted. “You two?”

“We’re unharmed.” Lan JingYi confirmed.

“Good, then I can break your leg without feeling awkward about it.” Jin Ling glared at Lan SiZhui. “I know you’re a well-mannered person, but what was this nonsense?”

“Excuse me?” Lan SiZhui was confused.

“Why did you chat with him?” Jin Ling poked the leader in the shoulder with the end of his bow. The man glared at him.

“I was stalling for time.” Lan SiZhui informed him.

“Next time don’t act so respectful with the enemy then. Some may get the wrong idea.” Jin Ling told him sternly and Lan SiZhui bowed his head, embarrassed.

“Have you recovered those you came for yet?” Jin ZiXuan inserted before the fight could elaborate. Lan SiZhui looked up and shook his head. “Then we should proceed. You, you, you and you. Come with us.” He ordered four of the Jin soldiers who were standing around. “You and you, take this person back to our camp and keep him under careful watch.” He indicated two soldiers towards the leader.

“I am Wen Chao’s general; this is a great offense toward the Wen Sect!” The soldier, general struggled in his restraints, angry. Lan SiZhui shared a look with Lan JingYi.

“We’ve done more offense than this.” Jin Ling said. “You think we care for one more?”

“Take him.” Jin ZiXuan repeated the command, and the two MeishanYu soldiers he assigned to this role bowed, picking up the general under his arms and leaping away. “Where are those prisoners then?” Jin ZiXuan asked.

“We’re not sure. We suspect in the main study.” Lan JingYi said, and Jin ZiXuan made a face as if he expected a bit more detailed answer than that.

“This way.” Lan SiZhui pointed with his sword, then with a leap, the eight of them set off.

They landed amongst the buildings in the private part of the supervisory office once again, their path clear where injured and dead soldiers laid around. Lan SiZhui swallowed his guilt and led them towards the main building, where now four soldiers stood, their swords drawn. Lan SiZhui and the others hid behind one of the buildings to avoid being seen right away.

“They’re inside?” Jin ZiXuan asked quietly.

“We suspect.” Lan SiZhui nodded to him. He was reminded now to their time in Xuanwu cave, when Jin ZiXuan offered his help freely, now he looked just as determined, if a little less arrogant though.

“I’ll take care of the guards.” Jin Ling said, notching four arrows.

“This is the weapon people call Huangfeng?” Jin ZiXuan asked, eyeing Jin Ling’s bow. The other frowned, looking down at his bow.

“They call it that?” He asked. Jin ZiXuan nodded.

“That’s actually pretty fitting.” Lan JingYi said. “You were looking for a name anyways, weren’t you?”

“It’s SiZhui and you who like to name things after bugs.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Well, then at least you’ll join our ranks.” Lan JingYi grinned, and Jin Ling rolled his eyes, looking back towards his target. He drew the bow and took a deep breath, releasing the string upon exhale. The four arrows flew true and hit their target right where they were intended. Jin ZiXuan made a sound and Jin Ling looked over, frowning.

“What?” He asked.

“Hm.” Jin ZiXuan’s eyebrow twitched, and then with a flick of his sleeves, he left them standing there, heading towards the building. Jin Ling called after him:

“What?! What does that ‘hm’ mean?!” When it became clear Jin ZiXuan won’t answer, he turned to Lan JingYi. “What does that ‘hm’ mean?” He asked, eyes wide and confused. Lan JingYi just looked at him, then looked over at Lan SiZhui.

“Let’s go.” He said, and with that, the two of them also followed the Jin Sect Heir.

“Why isn’t anyone answering me?!” Jin Ling fumed behind them, but quickly caught up. By the time they arrived, Jin ZiXuan already moved inside with his men, the four Jin soldiers making a quick work of the guards charging at them inside. The four of them only had to walk inside after them, while they were busy securing the path. They tied up three guards of the six who were waiting inside, three lying on the floor, bleeding out.

From above their heads, they also heard feet moving around and Jin ZiXuan gestured his men to move forward. They walked up the stairs after them, watching as two of the Jin soldiers engaged in combat with two Wen guards, while the other two Jin were making quick work of the other Wen in the room, for they were not soldiers. Their clothes were ordinary, making Lan SiZhui believe they were the supervisors.

As soon as the remaining guards were subdued, and the four Wen non-soldiers were lined up in the middle of the room, the building fell quiet.

Jin ZiXuan had his hands behind his back, despite having fought earlier, now he looked like the spoiled Sect Heir he had reputation for. He stepped in front of the supervisors, looking down at where they were kneeling, like an Emperor at his eunuchs.

“Who is the head of this facility?” He asked coldly.

“I am.” Said one of the men, looking up defiantly. “I am Wen Chu, Wen Chao’s general, and I \_\_\_”

“Where are Wen Qing and Wen Ning kept?” Jin ZiXuan cut him off.

“This is outrageous, a clear offense against the Wen Sect—”

“Why does your kind always bring this up, like we’re not in the middle of a war?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed, his arms crossed over his chest. “This is how this works. We attack, you attack, we take prisoners, you take prisoners.” He said. “You can’t pretend to be the offended party while in reality, your Sect was the one that attacked us in the first place.”

“The Wen Sect would never—”

“How about the Cloud Recesses then, or the attack against Lotus Pier – would you not call that attacks?” Jin Ling glared.

“Enough.” Jin ZiXuan said quietly, turning his head just so he could see Jin Ling from the corner of his eyes. “You can discuss the circumstances of your capture with Sect Leaders Jiang, Lan and Nie once we bring you back, but for now, just tell us what we need to know.”

“And why would the Jin Sect care for those two traitors?” The general asked. “They’re Wen, are they not? Didn’t you just say you’re warring against them?”

“Our reasons are ours to know.” Jin ZiXuan said. “Answer.”

“Answer this instead, Young Master Jin, what would your father say to your actions? Him and Wen RuoHan are old friends, are they not? Even if you deserted, what do Sect Leaders Jiang, Lan and Nie think about you freeing the enemy? More so, allying yourself with one?”

Here, he looked pointedly at Lan SiZhui. Jin ZiXuan was quiet for a long minute, then turned his back to him, facing Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui.

“Three of you stay here. Mo Shen, go and ask for assistance from those who stayed at the gates, bring these four back to the camp as well.” He addressed the Jin soldiers. Lan SiZhui’s eyebrows furrowed, and he looked over at Mo Shen when he bowed. It would not be for more than a decade still, and his memories from that night were blurry at best, so unfortunately, he could not say if this Mo was the same Mo who called himself the head of the Mo manor in their own time.

“Come on, we will look through the buildings.” Jin ZiXuan told the Lan and Jin Ling, leading them down the stairs. They looked through most rooms in this house but found no trace that Wen Ning or Wen Qing had ever been kept here. Lan SiZhui found multiple clothes in the same size and style Wen Qing wore hers, but seeing this was her private quarters previously, this wasn’t surprising.

They went out then, looking around at the various buildings around them.

“Should we look through all of them?” Lan JingYi asked, forehead wrinkling at the thought immediately,

“We should look there first.” Lan SiZhui suggested, nodding towards the tower-like building he’d noticed earlier.

“Let’s go.” Jin Ling agreed, pushing past them, his bow clutched tightly in his hand. They followed him to the tower, then stopped short at the sight of the walls.

“Does anyone see an entrance?” Lan JingYi asked. They walked around it, trying to find any opening, but came up empty. Then, Lan SiZhui put his hand on the wall and closed his eyes, pushing some spiritual energy into the material, just to feel if there was any trick or ward keeping them out. Finding nothing, he turned back and gave a helpless shrug.

“It must be a hidden door.” Jin Ling said, walking up and putting his hands on it as well, running them over it.

“Step aside.” Jin ZiXuan said, and confusedly, the two who stood next to the building took a step back. Jin ZiXuan stepped closer, and Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui watched in fascination as he pulled out his sword, sending a wave of spiritual energy towards the building. This attack was effective enough, and accompanied by a cloud of dusk, the wall crumbled, revealing dark interior.

Lan JingYi coughed, fanning a hand in front of his face to get rid of the dust. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling also covered their nose and mouth with their sleeves. It took the dust a minute to settle, then Jin ZiXuan sheathed Suihua with a smug little smirk playing in the corner of his lips.

“We would’ve found the entrance...” Lan JingYi said. “... eventually.”



“Who has time for that?” Jin Ling huffed, and immediately Lan SiZhui was reminded of the accident with Jin Ling and the Nie ancestral hall. He’d only heard stories of this incident, but Senior Wei said Jin Ling also burst the wall open with spiritual energy instead of finding the hidden entrance; like father like son.

“Let’s go.” Jin ZiXuan prompted and one by one, they filtered inside. Although the lanterns from around the supervisory office provided them with some light, they were still in the dark. Lan SiZhui pulled out a fire talisman and they took a look around – it didn’t look anything like prison cells, instead it looked like a storage room of some kind, with various sacks and barrels all around.

“Great, we broke into the best concealed pantry ever.” Jin Ling scoffed, kicking away a potato that fell out of a sack from the blast earlier. Lan SiZhui also felt disappointed, until the potato Jin Ling kicked away rolled to the far side of the room and he heard something.

“We could use those soldiers now to look over the buildings.” Lan JingYi said even as Lan SiZhui stepped closer to the far wall.

“These men aren’t here to find strays, but to defend you.” Jin ZiXuan said. “They are not your servants.”

“I didn’t say that. I’m also going to search, are you saying I’m acting as a servant?”

“Are you not?” Jin Ling inserted with an amused hum. Lan SiZhui tapped his foot on the ground.

“Young Mistress, it’s one thing that you treat everyone like your servant, but that doesn’t mean everyone is actually your servant.”

“Over here.” Lan SiZhui called out and they halted their conversation, looking over. Jin Ling and Lan JingYi moved towards him first, then Lan JingYi helped him push away some sacks and barrels that fell over in the explosion earlier. This revealed a slightly dusty, but obvious trapdoor on the floor. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look, then took hold of the hook to pull it open, their Lan arm strength required to lift the heavy weight.

The trap door revealed a staircase leading down and they exchanged a look before Lan SiZhui took the lead and started down first. It was lit up inside by lanterns, and there was a guard snoring loudly at the entrance. Lan SiZhui froze when he first saw him, then turned back to Lan JingYi, holding up a hand, silently asking for a numbing talisman. He quickly got one and he applied it without the guard becoming wiser to the sneak attack against him. They still drew their swords, expecting more enemies, but upon entering whatever room they had, they quickly realized there was going to be no other who would try to stop them.

This room was small, barely any furniture inside, not that that was the most notable about it; that was, instead, the bars separating the room into two parts. On the other side of the bar was some supplies; two buckets, some trays stacked on each other, bedrolls rolled up to the side, and finally, a pile of blankets in the corner.

Lan SiZhui swept his gaze over the room, frowning. He was trying to find any evidence that Wen Qing and Wen Ning were ever here, but this cell looked abandoned. Even if the bedrolls gave one hope, the buckets, the blankets tossed to the side... Lan SiZhui paused, looking at the blankets. No, not blankets...

“Qing-jie!” He cried out and rushed over. Lan SiZhui fumbled at the locks unfamiliar with the mechanism, but as soon as he figured how they turned and twisted, he threw the door open and rushed inside.

Lan JingYi and the two Jin were following in a similar pace, but he hardly noticed as he threw the blankets off the people huddling in the corner. Lan SiZhui stared down at them, relieved and terrified in equal measures. Wen Qing was curled around Wen Ning, holding his head to her chest tightly. As the blanket was removed, steady gaze fixed itself on Lan SiZhui’s face, and for a long moment, they just stared at each other.

“Lan SiZhui?” She asked with disbelief coloring her voice and Lan SiZhui nodded eagerly. Her body relaxed a fraction, but she still looked protective and tense. “Wen Chao said... You’re alive.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “It is a long story.”

“And one for other times.” Jin ZiXuan said. As Lan SiZhui looked up, he saw the other standing not behind him like he suspected, but at the door next to the frozen guard. “However well we secured the office for now, who knows when will reinforcements come. We should leave.”

“Can you two walk?” Lan SiZhui asked, then looked down at Wen Ning, still hidden in his sister’s arms. His throat tightened at the realization he hadn’t moved yet. “Wen Ning, is he...”

“Injured, but alive.” Wen Qing nodded.

“Let me help carry him.” Lan JingYi knelt next to Lan SiZhui, reaching out, but Wen Qing flinched back from him, eyeing his robes. Lan JingYi caught the look as well, so he quickly reassured: “I’m Lan Cheng, Lan JingYi.”

“Ah.” She nodded, looking briefly to Lan SiZhui for confirmation, who gave it immediately. Still, Wen Qing was slow to release Wen Ning, which was fine. As Lan JingYi pulled the younger boy’s arm over his shoulder, Lan SiZhui looked over him, but found no obvious injury on him. Instead of asking, he took Wen Qing’s hand and helped her up too, even though she hadn’t let go of Wen Ning’s hand.

“Let’s go.” Jin Ling said behind them, and seeing him seemed to further reassure Wen Qing – or she was simply too tired, and slumped a little over Lan SiZhui, her hand dropping her brother’s. They carried the two of them outside, Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan in the lead. As soon as they were out, they ran into two Jin soldiers waiting in front of the building.

“Good, you’re here.” Jin ZiXuan nodded. “Go around and let everyone know we’re returning to camp. By midday tomorrow, everyone should be there.”

“Yes, Young Master.” The two bowed and hurried off. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui pulled out their swords. There was an awkward moment when they looked to Jin Ling, who also looked uncertain. Then, Jin ZiXuan urged him.

“Jin Ling, come.” Jin ZiXuan said coldly, indicating towards his own sword. It must’ve been strange, riding his own sword under another master’s command. Lan SiZhui wondered if Suihua would still respond to Jin Ling’s commands, having the same blood – but it was a distracting thought and he quickly dismissed it, jumping on his sword with Wen Qing.

Jin ZiXuan led them over the night sky, back towards Yunmeng. It took them about ten minutes to reach somewhere between the two cities, and then they landed in the forest at a clearing. There, many soldiers were already waiting for them, again mainly Jin, but many Lan disciples as well.

“We prepared tents.” Jin ZiXuan said, then led them through camp, not even glancing at his men bowing to him, radiating an arrogant, spoiled air once more. They arrived in front of a big, white tent, one Lan SiZhui would find too extravagant in any other circumstances. Pushing the flap inside, Jin ZiXuan said: “Lady and brother Wen may stay here for the time being.”

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi, with Jin Ling’s support, helped the siblings inside. There were already two beds set up, divided by a curtain in the middle. This was more of a proper room than the cell they were kept in and Lan SiZhui felt anger stir in him at the thought that even a tent in a war camp was more luxurious than where they’ve been imprisoned for months probably.

However, he didn’t have time for anger, for Wen Qing began protesting as soon as she was sat on the bed.

“A-Ning—”

“Is right here.” Jin Ling said where he stood in front of the divider, his hands on his hips.

“I can’t—” Wen Qing began again, sounding frustrated. With a wave of spiritual energy, Lan SiZhui pushed the curtain back, so she could see. This seemed to settle her for a moment, then she tried to stand. “I have to—”

“Lady Wen, you’re a doctor yourself, so you must know it is foolish trying to tend to another in your state.” Came a familiar voice from the entrance. Lan SiZhui was surprised to see the Jiang healer who’d treated him as well entering.

“Master Hua.” Wen Qing looked at them with wide eyes. Lan SiZhui couldn’t even imagine where she knew them from.

“Lay back. I’ll examine your brother, but only if you behave.” They gave Wen Qing a small, encouraging smile and Wen Qing eased herself back into the bed. Hua Qing then looked over at the four non-Wen inside the tent with a pointed look.

“Ah, we’ll leave you to it.” Lan JingYi said, tugging at Jin Ling’s arm. The two bowed before following the quietly exiting Jin ZiXuan out. Lan SiZhui hesitated.

“We won’t go anywhere.” Wen Qing told him with a look. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“I’ll be near. If you need anything, let me know. I’ll come back in the morning.” Though it filled him with anxiety to leave them for the rest of the night, he knew he couldn’t be of help at the moment.

“There’s no point.” Hua Qing said. “They’ll be sleeping the whole day, I suspect. Brother Lan should rest as well, it had been a long night I hear.”

Lan SiZhui nodded, swallowing, still not moving.

“Do I have to tell you to go away?” Wen Qing leveled him with a look, and this, more than anything reassured Lan SiZhui that she regained some of her spirit. He smiled at her, then bowed.

“Please, care for them well, Master Hua.”

“Mn.” The healer nodded to him, then with one last look exchanged between cousins, Lan SiZhui left the tent as well.

Outside, Jin Ling, Jin ZiXuan and Lan JingYi were waiting for him. As soon as he appeared, Jin Ling turned to his father with a stern look.

“Now, will you explain?!” He asked irritably, and Lan SiZhui suspected he got left out of an argument.

“Process had been made after you’ve departed.” Jin ZiXuan said. “Sect Leader Lan deemed it acceptable for me to come on ahead with a few soldiers. Thus, we’re here.”

“This was not what we talked about.” Jin Ling said, glaring at his father. “You were not supposed to come, and help should’ve arrived from the camp where Lan XiChen is staying.”

“Yes.” Jin ZiXuan told him with the calmness of a monk.

“Then I’m asking again, why are you here?!” Jin Ling asked angrily, just a hair away from actually stomping his foot. Lan SiZhui did not find this amusing *at all*.

“Do you have issues with your hearing? Master Hua would gladly take a look, I’m sure.” Jin ZiXuan cocked an arrogant eyebrow.

“You—!”

“It is late and I’ve traveled all day and battled all night.” Jin ZiXuan said in a dismissive tone. “Tomorrow we shall share lunch and discuss over this. The servants will show you to your tents.” With this, he turned and without any parting words, left them standing there, heading towards the biggest tent on the field.

“What an arrogant, cocky—!”

“Young Mistress, that’s enough.” Lan JingYi made a face. “He is your father, after all. Let’s not say things you’ll regret later.”

“I’ll show you regret!” Jin Ling whirled around, pointing a finger in Lan JingYi’s surprised face.

“What?”

“What?” Jin Ling glared at him, then looked away, clearing his throat. “Servant!” He called out, and from three steps away from them, a person stepped closer, bowing.

“Brothers, I’ll show you your tent now.”

Led away by the servant, reluctantly the four of them went.

♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪

Despite going to bed late, Lan SiZhui found himself awake relatively early. As he stepped out of the tent he shared with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi, he headed straight towards Wen Qing and Wen Ning’s tent. Arriving, he found with some alarm that two Jin disciples were keeping guard.

“Brother Lan.” They bowed to him and he reciprocated.

“Brothers, may I ask why you’re here?” He asked somewhat hesitantly, a little cautious about the answer.

“Young Master Jin ordered us to keep guard last night.” The Jin soldiers said.

“I see.” Lan SiZhui said, still unsure if this meant they were supposed to keep people out or inside the tent. “May I enter?” The guard just shrugged and pulled away the flap, so Lan SiZhui only had to bow his head a little to enter. Inside, the sun cast a yellow glow over the room. The divider was still as Lan SiZhui left it last night.

Wen Qing was laying on her back, face and body slack, relaxed with unnatural sleep. As Lan SiZhui stepped closer, he saw the silver needle in her forehead, and guessed this was Master Hua’s work. He then turned to Wen Ning. He was lying in a similar pose, but he needn’t to have a silver needle, sleeping on his own. Lan SiZhui stepped closer and carefully picked up his wrist to test his pulse. It seemed fine, if a little slow, but he didn’t sense any internal injuries, which left him with a sigh of relief. He also didn’t see any external injuries and wondered what Wen Qing meant when she said he was hurt.

Instead of leaving for breakfast, Lan SiZhui settled between the beds, facing the entrance, then pulled out his guqin. He hadn’t had the opportunity to play much on Hudie other than fight or control resentful energies, so he was glad for being able to play not only something different, but also for his cousins, recalling some calming songs of the Lan Sect to play the siblings.

He was left to this for an hour before anyone came for him. Lan SiZhui was just wrapping up playing *Rest* when the flaps opened again, and the healer entered. Lan SiZhui looked up, expecting to be thrown out, but instead Hua Qing set some supplies they brought on a side table and then turned to him with an interested look.

“Brother Lan,” they bowed and Lan SiZhui was quick to put away his guqin to return the bow. “How are brother Lan’s own injuries fairing?” They asked.

“I feel much better than when we last met.” Lan SiZhui answered with a smile.

“That is good to hear.” Hua Qing nodded, then glanced at Wen Ning. “Excuse me for the curiosity, but I’ve noticed brother Lan is personally looking out for Lady and brother Wen.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “They are my cousins.” This seemed to surprise Hua Qing, but other than their brows rising, they didn’t comment.

“I see. In this case, I suspect brother Lan would also like to know about their condition?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble.” Lan SiZhui nodded eagerly. He hadn’t expected to be freely shared this information.

“Of course.” Hua Qing said, taking a breath to explain. Before they could speak though, the flap opened the third time this morning and Jin ZiXuan stepped inside. He had his head bowed to enter, so when he looked up, already inside, he paused, obviously not having expected Lan SiZhui’s presence.

“Young Master Jin.” Lan SiZhui bowed to him and the other inclined his head in his direction before turning to the doctor.

“I just came to inquire about Maiden Wen and brother Wen’s conditions.” He said politely, his temper clearly better than last night.

“I was just about to tell brother Lan about it.” Hua Qing nodded. “Lady Wen is simply exhausted, her injuries are light and not severe. She is malnourished and runs a mild fever, but it is not bad. Brother Wen on the other hand is not in a good condition. His spiritual powers are weak, so it’s natural he would heal slower, so it is understandable he is not as well. He has several extensive bruises, lash marks, but no broken bones; however, from what Lady Wen shared with me last night, I suspect he also bore a hit on the head and that is why he has not woken yet. If he doesn’t do so in the next few days, I’m afraid the damage may be permanent.”

“Wen Ning might never wake?” Lan SiZhui asked in a small voice. When he heard ‘lash marks’, he was already dreading what else, but this was beyond his worst expectations.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say that.” Hua Qing said. “I’d say he will wake, but his mind might not be the same. He might have issues with his memory. If brother Lan asks me, I’d say it is not severe.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui said quietly, looking over at Wen Ning. “And the lash marks?”

“Scabbed over, not completely healed. He cannot lie on his stomach though, for it might stop his blood and energies flowing into his brain.”

“How...” Lan SiZhui hesitated, then forced himself to ask, hazy memories of glimpsing at Hanguang-Jun’s back from his childhood flashing up. “How many are there? How severe are they?”

“It’s hard to tell how many. Wen Qing said he was lashed weekly at least five times.” Hua Qing said quietly, sadly. Lan SiZhui felt his throat close and his eyes burn. “But they are not too deep. They didn’t reach bones, that can heal. It truly concerns me less than his unconscious state.” Lan SiZhui nodded, having hoped better news. Still, Hua Qing didn’t seem overly concerned, and Lan SiZhui trusted them, though, his mind reminded him, they barely blinked at Lan SiZhui’s lack of spiritual energy while Jin Ling and Lan JingYi were ready to knock him unconscious just to take him to a doctor.

“When can we expect them to wake?” Jin ZiXuan asked.

“I intend to leave the needle in Lady Wen for a whole day. I’ll take it out tomorrow the latest, but don’t expect her to wake right away. Brother Wen might wake sooner – that is up to him.”

“Master Hua, thank you for your care.” Jin ZiXuan said after a pause, bowing to the healer. “We will be leaving you to carry on.” Lan SiZhui was mildly bothered by that the Young Master spoke in his place as well, but as far as commands went, this was a subtle one. They both bowed to the doctor before exiting the tent side by side. They walked a few steps away before Jin ZiXuan turned to him.

“Brother Lan, would you mind joining me for tea?” He asked, tone pleasant. Lan SiZhui remembered from their time in Qishan, that while Jin ZiXuan indeed resembled his son in looks greatly, his personality was quite different. He was also rude sometimes, but his rudeness, Lan SiZhui observed, was born more from his dislike towards someone, not like Jin Ling, who was rude to everyone, because he got used to having to argue all the time.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui bowed to accept the offer. Jin ZiXuan nodded, then turned and led him towards the area of the camp where the kitchen was set up. There was a pavilion pulled up not far from it, and that’s where they were heading, passing soldiers who were busy with training and equipment. They bowed to them, but Jin ZiXuan ignored them.

They sat at the pavilion, and needn’t to even ask, servants immediately began buzzing around them, bringing this and that to the table. Lastly, sweet-smelling tea made it to the table as well by a female servant, who bowed to them.

“Young Master, this is the tea called *‘Tears of the Phoenix Bird’* from over the Northern Sea. The taste is sweet and flowery.”

“Mn.” Jin ZiXuan hummed, reaching for the cup and sipping from it experimentally. Lan SiZhui also did the same, smiling at the woman. He was still greatly distracted by the news he’d received, wished he could go back, but he knew he couldn’t do much for either of his cousins. The best he could do was to distract himself with something else.

“It is very good.” He said politely.

“A little sweet for my taste.” Jin ZiXuan said dismissively to Lan SiZhui.

“Lanling is famous of its sweet and bitter teas.” Lan SiZhui agreed.

“Qishan is famous of its radical tastes as well.” He answered, but it didn’t sound offensive. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I have just tasted Qishan tea for the first time last summer during the Guest Lectures.”

“How so?” Jin ZiXuan cocked an eyebrow.

“I didn’t grow up in Qishan and wasn’t even aware of my heritage for long.” Lan SiZhui shrugged. “I simply didn’t have the opportunity, nor the interest before.”

“Hm.” Jin ZiXuan made a thoughtful face as he turned back to his tea, taking another sip. He then frowned and put it down. “Take it away, bring me something else. Brother Lan?”

“It’s fine for me.” Lan SiZhui replied.

“Yes, Young Master.” The servant bowed, picking up the cup and taking it away. Jin ZiXuan was quiet for a moment, then said:

“You seem loyal to Wen Qing and Wen Ning.”

“Mn. They are my family.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“Yet you did not know them or of them until recently.” Jin ZiXuan hummed, tracing some pattern on the table absently. Lan SiZhui fixed his eyes on his hand instead of his face.

“No.”

“Is your loyalty this easy to earn?” Jin ZiXuan asked somewhat skeptically. Lan SiZhui smiled at him tightly.

“It’s not that. Wen Qing had helped me during the indoctrination, then afterwards when we fled Lotus Pier with Sect Leader Jiang. She earned more than just my respect for putting her and her brother’s life on the line for me. Besides, I made a promise to Wen Ning.” He added quietly. “I’ve broken it and now he’s in this state. If I don’t help them, how can I claim to uphold justice?”

“Hm.” Jin ZiXuan was thoughtful again, then the servant showed up with another pot and cup of tea. She just drew a breath to describe the tea, but Jin ZiXuan waved a hand, dismissing her. With a bow, she left. “You also seem to be friends with one of mine.” Jin ZiXuan said, clearly an understatement. “How did you and Jin Ling come to be familiar?” For the first time, Jin ZiXuan also looked him up and down judgmentally.

“Ah, we’re cousins by association.” Lan SiZhui admitted. It was likely Jin ZiXuan already heard about this last summer, so there was no real point in lying, but he hoped Jin ZiXuan



wouldn't ask him who Jin Ling's father was.

"How so?" Jin ZiXuan tilted his head to look at him searchingly. Before Lan SiZhui could answer, they were, once again, interrupted. It seemed to happen a lot lately, Lan SiZhui mused. It was Jin Ling and Lan JingYi who appeared at the pavilion. They were led there by a servant, and as soon as they saw the two of them, they rushed up, their steps making hollow sounds on the makeshift wooden platform the pavilion stood on.

"There you are!" Jin Ling exclaimed. "We've looked for you everywhere." Before he could sit without a word, Lan JingYi grabbed his arm and made him bow to Jin ZiXuan. "Young Master Jin, good morning."

"Mn." Jin ZiXuan inclined his head, gesturing at the seats opposite him. "Sit. We'll have lunch and discuss what we couldn't last night."

"Thank you." Lan JingYi said and they sat. Soon, a servant showed up, serving them tea, then Jin ZiXuan told them to bring lunch and they left with a bow. He then turned to the three of them.

"Shortly after you left, Young Master Jiang and Wei WuXian managed to beat back some Wen who had been holding us up for the longest time. Sect Leader Lan suspected after this, it would not take them more than a week to reach where we are now and directed me to come on ahead, both to provide backup forces for the three of you and establish our next line of defense. For now, our job is to keep this position as securely as we can. We are allowed to make smaller attacks nearby, but we're not to move forward or engage in serious battle before they're close enough to offer support."

"That's good." Jin Ling nodded seriously. "But Lan XiChen promised you wouldn't come."

"Did he?" Jin ZiXuan cocked an eyebrow. "Brother, you might be cousin of the Lan, but your surname is still Jin, is it not?"

"So?" Jin Ling glared at him.

"So, I am your Young Master, not Lan XiChen." Jin ZiXuan told him.

"What did the Jin Sect ever do for me?" Jin Ling looked away, grumbling. This seemed to interest Jin ZiXuan mildly, but not enough to ask about it.

"If you're uncomfortable following my lead, I'm sure Lanling's training grounds will have a spot for you."

"Don't threaten me." Jin Ling glared at him. "You're—" He bit off the rest of the sentence, his eyes widening, then he looked away again. "Whatever."

"Young Master Jin." Lan SiZhui said after a moment. "Excuse Jin Ling. He is too used to independence." He paused. "All three of us are. We apologize for our defiance and thank you for your patience."

“Mn.” Jin ZiXuan threw him a sideways glance with a nod. There was an awkward moment when nobody said anything, then clearly, to ease the tension, Lan JingYi turned to Lan SiZhui.

“How’s Lady Wen and—and Wen Ning?” He asked. At this, Jin Ling also turned to him, though he seemed rather like someone who bit into a lemon.

“They have been badly treated, but hopefully, they’re on the path of recovery now.” Lan SiZhui said with a smile that was somewhat strained. He didn’t want to taint their mood as his was, so he didn’t talk about the injuries yet. It was fine for the time being.

“That’s good to hear.” Lan JingYi nodded. “For a moment, in the cell, I was afraid...” Lan JingYi trailed off, but Lan SiZhui knew what he meant. Wen Ning’s unnatural stillness and paleness was too much like the Ghost General and they were bothered by it.

“If he dies, he stays that way.” Jin Ling said pointedly. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes, but didn’t comment. There was a lull in the conversation then, but they needn’t to start again, because their lunch was brought.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Jin Ling's bow: 黄蜂 Huángfēng: "wasp"

## Resentment II.

Lan SiZhui was startled as he was shaken awake in the middle of the night, instructively reaching for his guqin. The instrument was in a qiankun pouch next to his bed, and he grasped it before realizing what was going on, looking at the person shaking him with wide eyes. It was a Jin disciple waking him with an urgent expression. As soon as he saw Lan SiZhui was awake, he took a step back, looking at the qiankun pouch with a guilty expression.

“Brother Lan, sorry for the disturbance.” He bowed, speaking very quietly. As Lan SiZhui looked around the tent, he saw that Lan JingYi and Jin Ling appeared to be still asleep, though Jin Ling’s shoulders were tense, so he suspected the other boy was actually awake.

“Is everything alright?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused. If something happened, shouldn’t they have to wake everyone? But the Jin disciple was speaking quietly, therefore he didn’t want to wake anyone else. Lan SiZhui awaited the news with his breath held back.

“Brother Wen had awoken and he’s asking for you.” The Jin disciple said.

Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened at this news, and before he even realized, he threw off his covers and swung an outer robe onto his shoulders. He hoped he didn’t wake Lan JingYi or disturb Jin Ling more than he already had, and gestured the Jin disciple to lead him out of the tent. There was barely anyone awake at this hour, mostly just patrols going around, hands on their swords as they walked the spaces between the tents with rapt attention. The Jin disciple led Lan SiZhui to the Wen’s tent and stopped to lift the flap for Lan SiZhui.

While he had a lantern, it was a small one, barely enough to light their way. There were also few lanterns hung around the camp, just enough to cast a dim light around. As Lan SiZhui entered the tent, he had to squint against the strong light inside, which came from three lanterns, but enclosed in the white of the tent, it felt glaringly bright.

As his eyes got used to the light, he took in the sight of the inside of the tent. Hua Qing was there, looking like they also just arrived. Wen Qing was still lying on her back, covered with a white blanket, but she looked peaceful. On the other bed Wen Ning was actually sitting up, and Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened at the sight he’d hoped to see ever since he fell into the Burial Mounds: Wen Ning, awake and *alive*.

“Ah, brother Lan!” He beamed, attempting to rise, but both Hua Qing and Lan SiZhui rushed over to prevent him from doing so. Wen Ning looked disappointed he couldn’t stand, but then his features smoothed and he smiled.

“Brother Wen, please.” Lan SiZhui meant to say more, but seeing the slight frown on his face, the sweat lining his forehead and other signs of obvious pain, he had a hard time finding appropriate words. He didn’t try instead, but collapsed on the ground, his forehead pressed to the wooden paneling protecting the tent from the earth below. “Wen Ning, please forgive me!” Lan SiZhui asked desperately.

“Senior Lan!” Wen Ning answered, sounding equally stressed out. “Ah, please, don’t— Please, rise!”

“Wen Ning, I have made you a promise that I failed to fulfill. Because of this, you had to endure several hardships throughout the past few months.” Lan SiZhui didn’t obey, still bowing. Lan SiZhui rarely had to apologize for himself, not for something he did, other than polite little ‘excuse me’s. His adoptive father disliked when Lan SiZhui apologized for his mistakes, as he often said, he should rather do better next time. So, when Lan SiZhui felt the need to apologize for something, he tried to do it properly. “Please, forgive me.”

“Brother Lan, no, it’s... It’s actually my fault I ended up like this! Please, rise.” Lan SiZhui looked up at him, seeing Wen Ning was just as desperate as him, but for different reasons. Lan SiZhui swallowed and slowly rose, ignoring the slight dirt on his robes. “Truly, brother Lan, there’s nothing to forgive! You have also been in an impossible situation. At the time I was foolish to believe without your Golden Core you could come back for me, so... so please, don’t be harsh on yourself! You also endured lots of hardships I’m sure. I’m actually very relieved!” He grinned sheepishly, admirably awkward. “Brother Lan survived the fall to the Burial Mounds, came back and even saved me and my sister; truly, you came back for us as promised, what else could I ask for?”

Lan SiZhui, uncomfortable with the compliment, not feeling like he deserved it, just bowed again, then inquired: “How are you doing?”

“From my examinations, I have concluded Wen Ning hadn’t suffered any long-lasting injuries. The scars on his back will remain due to his low cultivation, but other than some discomfort, he shouldn’t have many issues with that either in the future. After it heals, of course.” Hua Qing said.

“And I truly feel well!” Wen Ning nodded enthusiastically. “There’s some pain, but... Ah, I realize, at least I’m not dead.” Lan SiZhui tried not to flinch to that.

“How bad is the pain?”

“It’s not that bad.” Wen Ning shrugged, then immediately grimaced.

“Of course, it is going to be painful.” Hua Qing said. “But I’ve applied multiple salves onto the scars, so they should not be as bad as it would be without this.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Lan SiZhui asked next. “My Golden Core is healed and I can lend some spiritual energy.”

“Perhaps.” Hua Qing hummed thoughtfully. “If brother Lan doesn’t mind and truly feels alright now?”

Lan SiZhui nodded, stepping closer to Wen Ning, then halting, unsure. He gave Wen Ning a questioning look, who looked startled for a moment, then bowed quickly. This earned a hiss from three people in the room and Wen Ning looked embarrassed at his foolishness as he looked up.

“Ah, it would be an honor to receive brother Lan’s spiritual energy.” He said. “Thank you.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui smiled gently at him and stepped closer, completing the movements he learned so long ago that he didn’t need to use all that often, since he was often the one needing the help. There was a pause, a few minutes as Wen Ning received the spiritual energy, Hua Qing monitoring the process before moving away to continue mixing something behind them.

“Brother Lan, thank you for this.” Wen Ning said after a while. Lan SiZhui looked up at him and shook his head.

“It is my fault in the first place.”

“That’s not true.” Wen Ning shook his head. “Brother Lan, while it’s true you’ve made a promise to return for me, Wen Chao didn’t hesitate to begin my punishment.”

“Wen Chao said you were dead. Both of you.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“You met him?” Wen Ning asked, alarmed, then tensed. “Ah, right, you must’ve fought him, he’s—”

“Ah, don’t worry. He’s not here.” Lan SiZhui soothed.

“It’s not that I’m scared of him, I’m just worried... Did he escape?”

“No, he’s currently in the Cloud Recesses.” Lan SiZhui told him. Maybe he shouldn’t, but he by now accepted Wen Ning and Wen Qing were his family. He knew them to be loyal and despite everything, they wouldn’t betray what they believed was right. “We actually planted evidence to make it look like he was killed. I’m not sure if it works, but in any case, you should be aware.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning nodded seriously, and for a moment, with his pale face and dark clothing and serious expression, he reminded Lan SiZhui of the Ghost General. “Ah, this reminds me...” Wen Ning now blushed, looking down. “Wen Chao also told us you were dead.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui expected this much.

“How did you survive? H-how long have you spent in the Burial Mounds?” Wen Ning asked this as if he was afraid of the answer. Lan SiZhui understood that fear. He was also anxious to learn about Wen Ning’s hardships, but he knew it was necessary to state one’s mind.

“Brothers,” the doctor said before Lan SiZhui could answer. Lan SiZhui didn’t know if they felt the awkward air between them or if they were just finished with the medical-smelling liquid they held in their hand now, but he was thankful for the distraction anyways. “It’s late and you’re both tired.” Hua Qing continued, stepping closer, indicating Lan SiZhui, who understood and took off his hand off Wen Ning, severing the flow of spiritual energy between them. Wen Ning immediately looked a little less comfortable, stiffening a little, but Lan SiZhui noted with satisfaction, he looked more comfortable than when he entered.

“Here.” Hua Qing handed the bowl to Wen Ning, helping him raise it to his lips.

“What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked curiously as he watched Wen Ning down the whole bowl.

“Sleeping draught.” Hua Qing said. “It won’t make him sleep more, but it will make his sleep less painful and more restful.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, listening closely.

“My sister used to give this to me after our parents died.” Wen Ning said quietly, and Hua Qing looked sad at that. “Ah, this reminds me, Master Hua, when will she wake?”

“Tomorrow.” Hua Qing nodded, looking over at the bed where Wen Ning was lying quietly with a silver needle sticking out of her forehead. “I will remove the needle then, and after, she will wake.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning nodded, suddenly looking tired. Lan SiZhui could sympathize with that, for he also felt a little tired, having been sleeping deeply only minutes before.

“Now, both of you look as tired as I feel.” Hua Qing smiled at them, then took the bowl from Wen Ning. “Please, rest now.”

“Here.” Lan SiZhui offered his help right away, stepping closer to help him lie back. Wen Ning smiled at him thankfully as he laid back on his back, grimacing and hissing as his abused flesh made contact with the bed.

“I’m sorry.” Hua Qing furrowed their brows. “I wish I could offer more than just what I have, but it’s important that for now you sleep like this.”

“How about on his side?” Lan SiZhui asked, feeling sorry for Wen Ning.

“Ah, I get nightmares if I sleep on my side, brother Lan.” Wen Ning pressed out through clenched teeth. “It’s alright.” He said, then after a few moments, he relaxed. He smiled at Lan SiZhui. “The salves and draught helps, it was just uncomfortable for a bit.”

“We’ll leave you to rest now. If you need anything, the Jin soldiers in front of the tent are at your disposal, please, use them to your advantage, don’t strain yourself unnecessarily.” Hua Qing said.

“Ah, brother Lan!” Wen Ning said before he even turned to leave. Lan SiZhui immediately stepped closer. “Will you visit tomorrow?”

“Of course.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I’ll be back in a few hours, don’t worry.”

“Thank you.” Wen Ning smiled at him and Lan SiZhui returned it.

“Sleep well, Wen Ning.”

“You too, brother Lan. Master Hua.”

“Good night.” Hua Qing also bid goodnight, then gestured Lan SiZhui, who obeyed and followed them out of the tent. As they exited the camp was quiet and peaceful at this time of

the night. The Jin guards nodded at them, the Jin disciple who led Lan SiZhui here nowhere to be seen. That was alright, Lan SiZhui would find his way back. They began walking in the direction of the tents, Hua Qing apparently having one in the same direction as Lan SiZhui did.

“Wen Ning is a strong kid.” Hua Qing said after a few moments of quiet. “He will be alright.” He reassured Lan SiZhui, who was grateful for the comforting words. This, however, reminded him of something.

“Master Hua, may I ask a question?”

“Mn.” Hua Qing nodded absent-mindedly.

“Where do you know Wen Qing and Wen Ning from?”

“Ah, that.” Hua Qing smiled gently, sinking their hands into their sleeves. They were quiet for a minute, then said: “I was their parents’ student. At that time, I’ve spent a lot of time with the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect, and occasionally also looked after the two of them before...” They trailed off. “Well, before.”

“Ah.” Lan SiZhui blinked, surprised. He didn’t expect this kind of answer. He suspected Wen Qing, being also a doctor knew Hua Qing through her profession, but he wouldn’t have imagined they had ties like this, where Hua Qing knew not only her but her entire family for a long time.

“We kept in contact for some time, though throughout the years this relationship faded somewhat, still till this day we exchange letters occasionally. They’ve also visited me in Lotus Pier two or so year ago.”

“Really?” Lan SiZhui was surprised, though he shouldn’t have been. He didn’t know much about times before the war, but it still felt somewhat wrong to imagine the Jiang Sect welcoming anyone from the Wen Sect into their home.

“Mn.” Hua Qing nodded. “Their parents and I were close, so naturally, we were also close.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui paused, then dared to ask: “Did you know others from the branch as well?” At this Hua Qing paused, looking at him for a minute, then said:

“I assume you mean Feixu’s owner?” Hua Qing asked with a small, teasing smirk and Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened. Hua Qing sighed. “I saw it in your hand occasionally.” They confessed. “Yes, I knew him. His name was Wen ChanYu. Though, he was a quiet young man, I admit I didn’t know him well. His brother was always livelier.”

“Wen ChanYu was one of Wen Chao’s men. Does that mean...?” Lan SiZhui wondered absently if his brother was also part of Wen RuoHan’s army.

“Ah, no, not at all.” Hua Qing shook their head. “Wen ChanYu always aspired to be a cultivator. He hoped by going to Qishan and joining the main family, he would be taught. The Dafan branch concentrates on healing, so he wouldn’t have been able to do so there. His

brother, Wen XiaoQiang never had such desires, and he was content staying as a farmer in the Dafan mountain range. His wife, Hao YiFei is a healer as well, and she has the best herbs thanks to his contribution.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui nodded, listening carefully. Even though he said, months ago, that he had no real desire reconnecting with his birth family, he couldn’t deny the curiosity that stirred in him ever since he grasped Feixu. He found he enjoyed hearing, learning about the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect. He wondered if the war was over, he could visit them. But then, he remembered Wei WuXian and Lan SiZhui’s own origins, how he and the other Wen came under his protection.

He thought maybe he could, after the war, make an effort to prevent all that from happening, even if it meant he wouldn’t be Lan SiZhui anymore. It was a bittersweet thought, not one he liked to think about. On one hand he was proud to be a Lan, the Sect gave him so much, Lan WangJi gave him such a good life. But on the other hand, thinking about letting all that happened after the war happen... It seemed selfish and cruel.

“Ah, sorry.” Hua Qing smiled awkwardly. “You only wanted to ask about Wen ChanYu and I went and talked about things you didn’t ask.” They paused. “You better return to rest, too. I’m sure you’ll be up and playing songs again by daybreak tomorrow.” Lan SiZhui felt his face heat at that.

“Thank you for caring for my cousins and for telling me about them as well, Master Hua.” Lan SiZhui bowed to them and they smiled at him pleasantly, waving off his gratitude.

“As a doctor, this is my duty. Sleep well, brother Lan.”

“Sleep well, Master Hua.” Lan SiZhui bowed again, waiting for Hua Qing to leave before turning back to his own tent, leaving as well. He was preoccupied on the rest of the walk to his tent, thinking of how he would be able to save his birth family from the inevitable fate that would befall them after the war. Jin Ling was, perhaps right when he said he was just like his adoptive fathers. He thought if it came down to it, he would do as Wei WuXian had. He would, in his place, become the YiLing patriarch if he had to, just to save those innocents.

When he entered the tent, Jin Ling stirred once again, sitting up to look over at him, rubbing at his eyes. Lan SiZhui’s earlier thoughts dissipated slowly and he focused back on the present.

“How is it?” Jin Ling grumbled in sleep-hoars voice. Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“Wen Ning will be fine.” Jin Ling huffed, dropping back on the bed, turning his back towards him. Lan SiZhui didn’t take offense, the younger boy’s actions amusing him a little bit actually.

“Whatever.” He grumbled. Lan SiZhui shook his head fondly, ignoring Jin Ling’s usual snappiness. He went back to his side of the room and stripped of his outer layers, hanging them up once again. He put Hudie back on his bedside table, then combed through his hair with his fingers. He was ready to get under the covers when Jin Ling slurred sleepily: “Good,



if he dies, I will kill him myself for causing you grief.” This was said so much later, Lan SiZhui almost forgot the topic, then he remembered and huffed, amused.

“That’s very courteous of Young Mistress Jin.” Came the mumbled reply from under Lan JingYi’s covers. Lan SiZhui ducked as a pillow flew across the room, landing on where Lan SiZhui assumed Lan JingYi’s head was.

“Let me sleep, you idiot.”

“M not the one still speaking...” Lan JingYi answered, his reply trailing off into soft snores. Lan SiZhui snickered, shaking his head, then blew out the candle.

“Good night, Jin Ling.” His answer was the rustle of covers as Jin Ling pulled his blanket over his head.



Next morning, he proved Master Hua right by going to the Wen’s tent right away. The morning brought a wave of mist to the clearing where the camp was set up. This, more than the temperature change signaled to Lan SiZhui that they’ve finally entered spring, when the mornings were biting cold, the days were comfortably warm, then the nights became chilly again.

Maybe because of their talk last night, maybe for other reasons, but Lan SiZhui couldn’t help wondering if he was already born. According to the history books, the Sunshot Campaign started early this summer, a year after the GusuLan guest lectures started a year ago. This meant it would go on for another few years before the YiLing Patriarch would take Lan SiZhui’s family to the Burial Mounds. By this timeline, Lan SiZhui would have already been born more than a month ago or he would still to be born in a year.

Lan JingYi was born in the same year as him, but late summer. When he visited his parents last summer, he said his mother wasn’t even pregnant yet, though that didn’t mean much, for she would be only giving birth a year later, she could’ve become pregnant by now.

Lan SiZhui shook off his thoughts as he got closer to the Wen’s tent, nodding to the Jin guards posing in front of it. They bowed to him and pulled the flap away to let him inside. The morning light penetrated the fabric of the tent somewhat, giving it a dim, soft lighting. Wen Ning and Wen Qing were mirrors of each other, sleeping on their backs. Lan SiZhui settled between the beds again, pulling out Hudie. The qin was not a loud instrument, so Lan SiZhui wasn’t worried it would wake Wen Ning, and so, he recalled the music sheets he’d known since he began playing the guqin and softly plucked at the strings.

Lan SiZhui had played four songs by the time movement was heard, and he looked up, seeing Hua Qing entering the tent with a servant, who carried a tray of supplies for them. As per their quiet instructions, the servant put the supplies on the table behind Wen Ning, then left without a word. Hua Qing nodded to Lan SiZhui as a greeting, but otherwise didn’t talk to him, not disturbing his play.

They were quiet as the camp around them became livelier. Lan SiZhui wasn't bothered by this, almost didn't even notice. Hua Qing also didn't do anything to muffle the voices outside, occupied with their tinkering around phials and bowls. This went on for a few minutes before Wen Ning stirred.

He came to with a groan and Hua Qing was by his side right away, helping him sit up.

"The salves must've worn off. I'll apply a new layer now." They said, moving back to the table, picking up a bowl. As they settled behind Wen Ning, they pulled down his robes, Lan SiZhui couldn't help but look. Wen Ning's entire torso was bandaged, some on his back bled through. Lan SiZhui watched, his mood dark, as Hua Qing removed the bandages, gently prying the fabric away from the open wounds. At the sight, Lan SiZhui felt sick, but he forced himself to keep playing.

"I'll begin." Hua Qing warned quietly, and Wen Ning nodded, his head bowed. It took Hua Qing a while, but in the end, the salve was applied. For a while afterwards, Wen Ning looked tense and like he would collapse any minute, but eventually this passed and his shoulders sagged, as if the salve just began to take affect. Lan SiZhui felt relieved at this, watching as new bandages were applied loosely, then Hua Qing helped the robe back onto Wen Ning and helped him sit so he was facing the other bed, bringing Lan SiZhui in his line of vision as well.

When he saw Lan SiZhui, Wen Ning's eyes widened and he hastily pulled at the robe on his shoulder to cover up a bit better, then attempted to bow. Lan SiZhui was quick to stop him.

"Good morning, brother Lan!" He greeted sheepishly. Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

"Good morning. Ah, Wen Ning, why don't you call me Lan SiZhui?" Lan SiZhui frowned. "We're familiar by now. You saved my life, so please, don't be so formal."

"I wouldn't dare!" Wen Ning's eyes widened. "Brother Lan is an esteemed cultivator several years my senior. It is not proper."

"We're also family." Lan SiZhui said, pulling a page from Wei WuXian's book and feigning hurt. Wen Ning looked nervous, glancing at his sister. "Wen Qing calls me by my name as well." Lan SiZhui reassured.

"Ah, then... if it's alright..." Wen Ning didn't sound so sure about that, but Lan SiZhui knew when to stop pushing and smiled at him. Wen Ning looked away and around, searching for something before his eyes caught on something behind his sister's bed. Looking over curiously, Lan SiZhui saw that it was a jug of water, and immediately felt foolish. He bagged Hudie, standing and heading towards the entrance before halting and uncertainly looking back at Hua Qing, who was quietly preparing some strips of fabric by Wen Ning's bed.

"Ah, Master Hua, it's alright if Wen Ning eats, right?" Lan SiZhui asked, not wanting to interfere with his treatment. Hua Qing looked up and over, almost as if they were deep in thought before they were addressed.

“Oh, yes. I’ve already ordered the kitchens to make something, I just didn’t expect brother Wen to wake so early; it will be here shortly.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then headed back to the water jug. He poured a cup and brought it over to Wen Ning, who smiled at him gratefully.

“Sorry for the trouble, bro—Ah, Lan SiZhui.” Wen Ning said awkwardly, and Lan SiZhui was delighted to note the blush creeping up his neck. He wasn’t much for teasing, but having grown up between Wei WuXian and Lan XiChen, he certainly saw the appeal.

“No trouble. How are you feeling?”

“It’s better now.” Wen Ning nodded. “I slept well, too.”

“That’s good to hear.” Lan SiZhui sighed. “I wish I could do more.”

“Your music helps.” Hua Qing noted from the side as they stepped away from Wen Ning’s bed and headed towards Wen Qing’s. “I’ve heard of the Lan musical cultivation. I believe I recognized some healing songs among those you’ve played.” Lan SiZhui felt his face heat having been caught doing that, but he wasn’t particularly embarrassed about it.

“Master Hua, are you going to pull the needle now?” Wen Ning asked as they watched Hua Qing stop by Wen Qing’s bed.

“Yes.” They answered as they put some supplies by Wen Qing’s bed. “Remember, Lady Wen might not wake right away, so be patient.” Wen Ning nodded his agreement and the two of them watched as the doctor pulled out the needle, dabbing at its place with a wet rag. Wen Qing didn’t stir, looking peaceful lying there.

“Master Hua, how long will it take?” Wen Ning asked, sounding anxious.

“A few hours or a few minutes, there’s no telling.” They said. “I will inform Young Master Jin of both your conditions. Please, do not move around and send someone to let me know if Lady Wen sirs.” Lan SiZhui and Wen Ning both nodded dutifully.

As Hua Qing left the tent, Lan SiZhui decided to keep playing – if Hua Qing thought it would help Wen Ning heal, he would stay and play all day long. He went back to the space between the two beds and sat, pulling Hudie out, settling it in his lap. He looked over when he saw Wen Ning move from the corner of his eyes, watched as the younger Wen laid on his side on the side, facing his sister. He smiled at Lan SiZhui when he noticed him looking and Lan SiZhui nodded at him approvingly.

He just began to play when the flap of the tent opened, and Lan SiZhui smoothed his palm onto the strings to quiet the instrument as a servant rushed in, tray in hand, head bowed. He quickly put the tray down next to Wen Ning; it was his breakfast. With that, he bowed and rushed out of the tent, not looking up once. Wen Ning and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look, then Lan SiZhui shrugged. As Wen Ning began eating, Lan SiZhui began playing.

Lan SiZhui played half a song before Wen Ning spoke.

“It is good that bro—Lan SiZhui found us when he did. The guards said once Wen Chao returns, they would take us back to Qishan to be punished by Wen RuoHan.” Lan SiZhui looked up from the strings, but didn’t say anything, watching Wen Ning’s pale face. He didn’t seem to expect a reply, so Lan SiZhui kept playing, listening to Wen Ning. “Wen Chao revealed he didn’t expect you to survive at all. He said even if you do, you might as well be a corpse in the condition you will be in.”

“He said he keeps his word and he promised if I didn’t return, he would kill you.” Lan SiZhui said, looking back down on his guqin. “I am glad he was lying.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning hummed quietly. “He wasn’t lying though.” Lan SiZhui’s fingers slipped on the strings for a moment, but he corrected himself and looked up at Wen Ning with worry on his face. “Ah, he didn’t hurt me. Before he could, my sister intervened. She said she would trade her life for mine.” He said quietly, sadly. “It’s a good thing she is too important to Wen RuoHan to kill. Wen Chao couldn’t kill her, but she threatened to kill herself if he kills me, so he had no choice but imprison us both.”

“And the lashes?” Lan SiZhui asked tentatively.

“Wen Chao declared me a traitor and because of this, my punishment was to be lashed.” Wen Ning sighed. “But it’s alright. If it’s either this or my sister also dies, I’d rather take this.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come earlier. If I knew…”

“If you knew, what would you have done, without a Golden Core?” Wen Qing’s voice came from the other bed. Lan SiZhui’s fingers slipped again, but this time he didn’t keep playing, pressing his palm on the strings to stop them from making a sound, then bagged the guqin, quickly getting on his feet. By the time he got up, Wen Qing was also sitting at the edge of her bed, looking at Wen Ning with wide eyes. “A-Ning, you’re awake.” She breathed with obvious relief.

“Take it easy, please.” Lan SiZhui said as she tried to get up. Wen Qing threw him a dirty look. Lan SiZhui raised his hands to show he meant no offense. “You have also been injured, and you had a fever just a day ago. Please, don’t exert yourself.”

“When did you wake?” She asked Wen Ning, ignoring Lan SiZhui. Wen Ning smiled at her.

“Just the previous night. Ah, we should let Master Hua know you’re awake.” Lan SiZhui quickly went to the entrance of the tent and told one of the guards to notify Hua Qing. As he returned, Wen Qing was already one foot off the bed.

“Ah, please, don’t—” Lan SiZhui began, but he got another glare from Wen Qing. In the end, he just sighed and held out his hand. “Let me at least help you then?”

“Fine.” She huffed, grasping his hand. Hers was small, with her fingernails longer than Lan SiZhui was used to from his peers. They dug into his flesh as she pushed herself up.

“Ah, sister, really, I’m alright, you should rest—”

“I’m not the one who had been used as a straw target for the Wen soldiers.” She snapped back. “I’ve had a little fever from the dirty water they gave us, what, you think I can’t handle it?!” All Lan SiZhui could think was he wouldn’t want to ever cross Wen Qing.

“It’s true it was just a fever, but you’re still weak.” Came a familiar voice from the entrance. As they looked over, they saw Hua Qing enter with Jin ZiXuan, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi in tow. While most of them were still teenagers, this tent was not spacious, and it was a bit of a squeeze to have them all enter while also staying at a respectable distance away.

“Lady Wen, it is good to see you finally awake.” Jin ZiXuan bowed to her and she inclined her head. She was still sitting on the bed, though she began to stand earlier, so now half her weight was on Lan SiZhui and he stood there, awkwardly holding her hand.

“Jin ZiXuan.” She huffed arrogantly. “Thank you for coming for us, but I’m afraid we didn’t escape one prison just to enter another one. If you have expectations, know that I have no useful information to you, but even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you anything.”

“Who said you were a prisoner here? Do they give you this kind of luxury in a prison?” Jin Ling snorted, gesturing around the tent. Wen Qing’s glare turned to him.

“Still holding onto Lan SiZhui’s thigh, I see, Young Master Jin.” She cocked an eyebrow at him.

“You—” Jin Ling glared at her, but before he could make a threat or argue otherwise, Lan JingYi next to him barked out a startled laugh.

“Ah, sorry, sorry.” He waved his hands as everyone turned to look at him. “Young Mistress Jin is most certainly not holding onto SiZhui’s thigh.” He said, thought the thought obviously delighted him.

“Young Mistress?” Wen Qing huffed, also amused. “How fitting. And who would you be?” She looked Lan JingYi up and down. Even though he introduced himself the night they saved them, Lan JingYi didn’t take offense her not remembering, since it had been a tiring time for her back then. Lan JingYi grinned, then bowed deeply.

“This humble Lan is Lan Cheng, Lan JingYi, Lady Wen.”

“If anyone, it’s JingYi clinging to SiZhui’s thigh!” Jin Ling said, seemingly glad to have a comeback at Wen Qing’s words.

“Everyone is clinging to his thigh.” Lan JingYi shrugged. “After all, he’s Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui felt his face heat at that, and he glared at his friends briefly.

“Ah, right, brother Lan, I don’t think we’ve officially met either.” Wen Ning said, pushing himself up on one arm.

“A-Ning!” Wen Qing warned him, glaring at her brother, but before she had to intervene, Hua Qing pushed Wen Ning gently back.

“Please, stay.” Lan JingYi told him with a worried expression. “It’s fine. We’ve met before, remember?” He raised his eyebrows and Wen Ning blushed, nodding.

“Where did you two meet?” Jin Ling frowned at Lan JingYi.

“In the Cloud Recesses, we ran into each other once.” Lan JingYi shrugged. “I almost ran into him, then we both apologized and moved on with our day.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes at that, but didn’t comment, so Jin ZiXuan stepped forward – but could only make it half a step to avoid getting too close. He looked awkward for a moment, then cleared his throat.

“Lady Wen, addressing your concerns, you are not a prisoner here.” He said. “We have no intention to keep you here against your wish and we also don’t expect you to give up any information. Since Lan SiZhui is your cousin and Sect Leader Lan took full responsibility for his actions, every decision concerning the two of you is up to him, as far as the four Sects are concerned.”

Lan SiZhui was surprised by this, not having expected this kind of treatment. Lan XiChen didn’t even inform him that he took responsibility for his actions even though technically he needn’t to make such a declaration. Lan SiZhui belonged to the Lan Sect, so everything he did was already the Lan’s responsibility. Lan SiZhui wondered what made Lan XiChen make such a declaration, then Madam Yu’s face flashed in his mind and he thought maybe this was why. Since his heritage was by now an open secret, at least among the more important people of the four Sects, he suspected, it was expected that many wouldn’t trust him.

“So, I have to ask your permission to leave now?” Wen Qing glared at Lan SiZhui, though she was still holding his hand and leaning half her weight on him. Lan SiZhui felt his face redden and he shook his head quickly.

“Of course, not, of course you’re free to do as you please. I wouldn’t dare to tell you what to do, after all you’ve done. That’s not why I saved you.” He was quick to reassure.

“Good.” She nodded, then gripped his hand tighter. “Then help me over to A-Ning.” She told him and Lan SiZhui nodded, letting her lean on him more as she stood. She was unsteady for a moment, hesitating, then she shifted her weight. After another moment, she straightened and let go of him, going over to the other bed with confident strides, sitting at the edge and picking up Wen Ning’s wrist.

“Ah, perhaps it’s best if we leave you to it.” Lan JingYi said, and when Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw neither him nor the Jin looked towards them, turning their heads away. This puzzled him, but he also agreed – the tent was full with just the Wen, the healer and Lan SiZhui inside.

“Lady Wen, we’ll go now.” Jin ZiXuan said. “If you need anything, the guards in front of the tent are at your disposal.”

“I won’t need them.” Wen Qing said, to which Jin ZiXuan just shrugged.

“As you wish. They will be here.” With this, Jin ZiXuan bowed to them, avoiding looking at them, face red. Lan SiZhui frowned as his friends followed his example and quickly left the

tent as well.

“He says we’re not prisoners, but he still keeps his eyes on us.” Wen Qing said grimly. Hua Qing sighed from the side.

“Young master Jin is protecting you as much as the others.” They said. “It is truly not because he wants to keep you here; I know, because I told him you wouldn’t like this. He said he would not interfere, but having guards around is helpful not just for the protection.”

“You don’t mind if we don’t believe him, do you, Master Hua?” Wen Qing cocked an eyebrow at them and Hua Qing shrugged. “What are you doing here anyways? From what I’ve seen last night, this is the Jin’s operation, yet last time we spoke, you were Jiang FengMian’s personal healer.”

“As I still am.” Hua Qing nodded. “He was the one who asked I come with, in case the two of you needed medical attention.”

“And why would he care?” Wen Qing frowned.

“Didn’t you save his life after Wen Chao attacked Lotus Pier?” Hua Qing cocked an eyebrow back at her.

“I didn’t do it for him.”

“Lan SiZhui also endeared himself to him.” Hua Qing smirked. “As brother Lan accurately said: ‘after all, he is Lan SiZhui’.” At this, Lan SiZhui’s face reddened completely and his ears even began to ring. He felt the urge to hide.

“Ah, as Jin Ling would say: ‘that’s enough, Lan SiZhui will grow a big head’.” Lan SiZhui tried dismissing the compliments. Wen Qing snorted at that, shaking her head.

“What a ridiculous friend.” She muttered as she turned back to Wen Ning and smoothed a strand of hair behind his ear. “So, you’re the one in charge of us now, Lan SiZhui.” She said, but her attention wasn’t on him. Still, Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“As I said, it is not my place. I truly don’t wish to decide anything for you.” He paused, feeling like he didn’t convince Wen Qing enough. “If you wish to leave, I will lend you my sword; if you wish to stay, I will lend you my room.”

“Why would we stay?” Wen Qing scoffed, looking up at him. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“Whatever reason, I will not question it. Ah, Jin Ling said if you were to ask for refuge, the main Sects would give you protection.” Lan SiZhui told her.

“Would they really?” She gave him a deadpan look. “Lan SiZhui, I am Wen RuoHan’s personal doctor and protégé. It is predictable that Jin ZiXuan didn’t know that, but I expected you’d know that, with how you claim to know us.”

“It’s not that I don’t know this.” Lan SiZhui frowned. “I am aware, but...” Lan SiZhui trailed off, unsure how to proceed. He couldn’t tell her he already knew everything she did, or

something close to it. “This information may not be as valuable as you think.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Wen Qing looked skeptical, and Lan SiZhui thought she had a good reason to be. “Besides, it’s not only the question of whether this information is valuable, but whether I am. What if you let me go and I go back to Qishan with knowledge about your forces?”

“Wen Qing...” Lan SiZhui sighed. “Wen Ning said that before we arrived, Wen Chao was intending to take you two to Qishan to be punished.”

“Yes.” Wen Qing nodded.

“So, does it make sense to think you might go on your own and offer your help to someone who wanted to punish you for protecting your family?” Lan SiZhui raised his eyebrows.

“What if I wanted his forgiveness? What if I spilled all your secrets, just because I wanted him to keep me in his grace?” Wen Qing countered with an arrogant expression. Lan SiZhui rolled his eyes.

“Ah, please, don’t fight, please, don’t fight.” Wen Ning said after they’ve been staring at each other for a while. “Bro—Lan SiZhui, tell us instead, how did you survive?”

Ah. Lan SiZhui looked down at the ground, reluctant to talk. After a moment, however, Wen Qing spoke as well.

“A-Ning, why do you need to know? He survived, isn’t it enough?” When Lan SiZhui looked up at her, surprised, she just looked at him deadpan. Lan SiZhui smiled, feeling grateful or the chance to avoid the topic. At the same time, he knew he should tell them, so he swallowed and began:

“It’s alright, I’ll tell you.” He then told Wen Ning, Wen Qing and Hua Qing about his time spent in the Burial Mounds – most of it, anyways. He didn’t tell them about his use of resentful energy, but he did tell them mostly everything else.

“What do you mean? What method did you use, without your spiritual powers to get out?” Wen Qing frowned at him, seeing through his attempts to brush off the topic. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“It’s not important.” Lan SiZhui looked away. Wen Qing watched him for a minute, then said:

“You said you used up almost all your talismans trying to get out, then went to find Feixu. If you didn’t have talismans and spiritual power, then how could you wander the Burial Mounds to find Feixu?”

“I...” Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to say. He didn’t meet with their eyes, then a small hand took his wrist and Wen Qing’s familiar grip to check his meridians and pulse pressed down on his wrist. “Ah, it’s really not necessary—” Lan SiZhui began, but a look from Wen Qing was enough to shut him up. After a minute, she frowned, then let go of him. Lan SiZhui didn’t comment, just pulled back his hand.



“Wen ZhuLiu didn’t crush your Golden Core?” She asked, confused.

“Ah, Wen ZhuLiu actually said something about that.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “He asked me why can’t my Core be crushed and also said there was something strange about my spiritual powers – do you think they’re related?”

“I don’t think they’re related.” Wen Qing said, taking his hand again. After a minute, she continued: “What he must’ve found strange about your spiritual powers, I’ve felt this before, this is why I’ve never questioned it...” She looked over at Wen Ning, then sighed. “I guess this just proves you’re not lying and truly are from the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect.”

“What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked eagerly.

“As a child, you must’ve lived near a shard of the Yin Iron. It is the same with A-Ning as well. His spiritual powers and his soul... They were more severely affected by this, but I recognize the same thing in you as well. The Yin Iron is the most powerful resentful spiritual tool. Because of this, it leaves a unique trace in one’s body – it isn’t dangerous or invasive, it’s almost like a handprint the resentful energy leaves on a person. As to why your Core cannot be crushed, this has nothing to do with that, and frankly, I have no idea. I have never met anyone who survived Wen ZhuLiu’s attack with an intact Core, much less someone who got hit twice.”

“Handprint?” Lan SiZhui asked back, confused. Wen Qing sighed.

“Yes. It isn’t dangerous, you needn’t to worry. It’s almost like having a finer sense for resentful energy. It sounds worse than it is.” She looked down at her brother, and seeing him peering at her equally as curious as Lan SiZhui felt himself to be, she caressed his cheek. “It really is harmless. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I see...” Lan SiZhui murmured, deep in thought.

“Alright.” Hua Qing said, stepping forward. “Now that you discussed everything, it’s time that the two of you rest.” They told Wen Ning and Wen Qing and Lan SiZhui blinked, alarmed. He didn’t mean to interrupt them so long.

“Ah, right.” Lan SiZhui said, taking a few steps back until he stood at a respectable distance away, then bowed to them. “I’ll get going then.”

“Lan SiZhui!” He heard Wen Qing call out before he reached the entrance of the tent and Lan SiZhui turned back, curious. “Me and A-Ning will go back to our hometown.” She said, not meeting his eyes. Lan SiZhui paused, blinking at her.

“Ah, won’t that be dangerous?” Lan SiZhui worried. “Maybe we could go, and get them, hide them in the Cloud Recesses...”

“No.” Wen Qing said, looking into his eyes sternly. “My family are healers and have nothing to do with the war.” Lan SiZhui realized for Wen Qing and Wen Ning, for everyone else, the outcome of the war was not as definite and known as it was for him and his peers. He hastened to explain:

“Cousin, if the four Sects win this war, they will not make a difference between people who fought and people who did nothing. They only leave those alive who ask for their help. Please, come to the Cloud Recesses with your family. We can help.”

“Lan SiZhui, do you think I’m stupid?” she glared at him. “If we go there, we will be mere prisoners. Your confidence in the four Sects is admirable, but even you can’t predict the future. My duty is to protect A-Ning and my family. If we can’t join sides, we will just be our own side.”

“You don’t understand.” Lan SiZhui told her, frustrated. “To the four Sects, a Wen is just a Wen, regardless if they fought in the war or just didn’t do anything to stop it. If you stay, they will take you as prisoners, and they won’t care you’re not cultivators—”

“Why are you so sure the four Sects will win?” Wen Qing asked, annoyed.

“You don’t think they will?” Lan SiZhui asked her.

“I don’t care one way or another.” Wen Qing said after a pause. “A war is just a meaningless reason to kill people, making the doctors’ jobs harder. I can’t treat everyone, because then my own will see me as enemy, I can’t treat only my own, because then, to everyone else I will be the enemy. So no, Lan SiZhui, for me there is no ideal outcome of this war. The best I can do is to go back to my family and protect them from whoever comes for us, be it someone in red robes or white.”

“But it’s dangerous and—” Lan SiZhui couldn’t tell her this will just result in her family getting arrested by Jin GuangShan. Although... If Lan XiChen knew the truth, who said others couldn’t? “Cousin, the truth is I—” Before he could finish, Wen Qing gave him a stern look.

“Enough.” She said, standing, and just now did Lan SiZhui realize why the others acted so strange earlier and he felt his face heat as well – Wen Qing was only in her inner robes! He looked down on the ground to avoid looking at her, even though the garment covered her up completely, it was still unbecoming to look at a lady in her underwear. “Lan SiZhui, we take care of our own. You do the same. If you also do that, then I will know that you are also my family.”

“But it’s—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She said sternly. “I didn’t ask for your help, and I don’t need it either. Thank you for rescuing A-Ning and I, but your debt is considered repaid with this. We will go on our separate ways from now.”

Lan SiZhui watched her silently for a long time, feeling torn. On one hand, he desperately wished Wen Qing and Wen Ning would listen to him, that they would be safe from the cruelty of war. In reality, he was still just a stranger to them, and just because he knew their destiny, it didn’t mean he had any right to question or manipulate their choices. He admired Wen Qing for her determination and loyalty to stand by her family. He will just have to work hard that this time around, Jin GuangShan would not condemn the Wen to the same fate again.

“I understand. I apologize for overstepping.” He said with a bow, then turned and walked out of the tent. He couldn’t take but a few steps before a servant came up to him and bowed.

“Brother Lan, Young Master Jin and the others are waiting for you at the dining pavilion.”

“Ah, thank you.” Lan SiZhui returned the bow, then headed that way.

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It was the next day when Lan SiZhui saw Wen Qing and Wen Ning next. He only meant to go quickly check on them, but didn’t expect them to be up and moving around. Lan SiZhui was confused when he saw they were fully dressed up, and bags of supplies were being prepared.

“You’re leaving?” He asked, confused. Wen Qing threw him a deadpan look. Lan SiZhui didn’t forget their conversation yesterday, of course, but he didn’t expect them to be going so soon. Wen Ning wasn’t even fully healed! “Isn’t it too soon? Ah, you can stay and heal up—”

“We have no desire to meet the Sect Leaders.” Wen Qing said as she turned to put away some bowls. Lan SiZhui looked at them anxiously.

“Can I at least accompany you there?”

“You cannot.” Wen Qing said, not looking up from her pack. “This isn’t your business anymore, Lan SiZhui.”

“But it’s dangerous—”

“It’s also dangerous for us to stay.” Wen Qing said sternly.

“I can protect you.”

“Not from your own family, you cannot.” Wen Qing said defiantly. She then sighed, tossing the piece of clothing she’d been holding onto the bag, turning to him. “Lan SiZhui, we’re grateful for your help so far, but there is nothing else you can do for us. A-Ning needs to heal and for that, I need him to be completely safe. The only place safe for us now is our former home.” Lan SiZhui was quiet at this, not knowing what to say.

“Ah, bro—Lan SiZhui, it’s alright.” Wen Ning said from where he was sitting on his bed, fully clothed, clearly having been told to stay put. “We will go home and stay safe. It’s the best option for us right now. And once the war is over, we will worry about what happens then.”

Lan SiZhui watched them, sadly, not knowing what else to do. Wen Qing was right, this was not his business anymore, but he couldn’t help the anxiety stirring in him, telling him to take the siblings to Cloud Recesses and hide them there until it was all over. He knew he couldn’t do that though, with this, he would go against Wen Qing’s every wish, and even if it meant keeping them safe, it wasn’t worth the enemy he would make of her.

“Are you sure I can’t at least take you there?” He asked quietly.

“Master Hua arranged a carriage for us, it will take us there without being stopped. If we get caught by the Wen, we will just say we were imprisoned.” Wen Qing said as she pulled the bag closed. Before she could shoulder it, Lan SiZhui went up to her and took the bag. They exchanged a look, then Wen Qing rolled her eyes and gestured towards the tent’s opening. Lan SiZhui watched as she helped Wen Ning on his feet, gently holding his elbow to support him.

Lan SiZhui exited the tent and waited for the siblings to come out as well. Once they have, Wen Qing nodded towards the opposite direction of Lan SiZhui’s tent. They headed that way, towards the edge of the camp in silence. As they got closer to the carriage, Lan SiZhui already saw a familiar form standing next to it.

“Lady Wen, brother Wen.” Jin ZiXuan bowed to them and Wen Qing gave him an icy look. “I’ve heard you’re leaving. I thought it would only be proper for me to say goodbye.” Jin ZiXuan said, his eyebrows raised in a challenge. Wen Qing huffed and nodded to him.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Young Master Jin.”

“May I ask where you’re going?” He inquired nonchalantly. “I can send a few soldiers ahead to make sure your journey is safe.”

Wen Qing’s eyes flashed dangerously as she looked him up and down, then she pressed her lips together and looked away. “We’re going to Zhongshu.” Lan SiZhui tried his hardest not to react visibly. Of course, Wen Qing wouldn’t tell him where they were going. Zhongshu was to the north from the Dafan mountain range, well out of the way but close enough that if the Wen decided to hire another carrier in Zhongshu, they wouldn’t face a high fee, and also wouldn’t have to travel for hours.

“Very well.” Jin ZiXuan nodded, gesturing to two soldiers also standing close by. The two of them bowed and jumped on their swords. “They will make sure you don’t encounter anything unexpected until you get there.”

“Thank you, Young Master Jin.” Wen Qing told him in an expressionless tone.

“Of course. After all, the two of you saved not only the Jiang Sect’s future but also my disciple.”

“Ah, where are brother Jin and brother Lan?” Wen Ning asked, looking around.

“You haven’t really told anyone you were leaving!” Came Jin Ling’s voice from behind them and the Wen turned to see him and Lan JingYi approaching. Jin Ling’s golden robes were fluttering as he walked, giving him a regal air and Lan SiZhui couldn’t help, be reminded once again that in the future, he would become Sect Leader. “Naturally, we were having breakfast when a servant told us Young Master Jin was seeing you off.”

“And you just had to come?” Wen Qing cocked an eyebrow. Jin Ling leveled her with an arrogant gaze.

“Since Lan SiZhui is my cousin by association, that makes you something of a relatives to me as well. It is proper.”

“How familial.” Wen Qing huffed. “Next, you will ask me to stay like he did as well.”

“I wouldn’t dare tell lady Wen what to do.” Jin Ling told her. “But I will tell you this: if you or Wen Ning die, I will curse your souls for hurting Lan SiZhui.”

“How protective.” Lan JingYi noted from the side and with this, Jin Ling’s assumed air of calm dissipated and he turned to his friend, face reddening.

“Who’s protective?! I’ll break your legs!”

“Ah, brother Jin truly cares for his friends.” Wen Ning smiled at him and Jin Ling glared back.

“You—Just because you’re hurt right now, don’t think I won’t break your legs as well.” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened at the threat. He came to expect that Jin Ling did not throw this threat around as much to just everyone. If he said this to someone, they meant something to him, and Lan SiZhui felt himself smile at the thought that Jin Ling began to care for Wen Ning. “What are you smiling about?!” Jin Ling addressed him next.

“Nothing.” Lan SiZhui waved his hand dismissively, then went over to the carriage, putting the bag inside, then holding the door open. Wen Qing nodded to him, then turned to Jin ZiXuan.

“Thank you again, for coming for us.” She said and bowed. However, when Wen Ning tried to bow as well, she quickly stopped him, then led him towards the carriage. It took a minute to get him inside, then Wen Qing stopped next to where Lan SiZhui was still holding the door. “I hope you didn’t forget your promise.” She said, and Lan SiZhui was confused for a moment before Wen Qing looked over his shoulder and he realized she meant his promise about Feixu. He nodded, then stepped back and bowed to her.

“Cousin, when the war is over, I will visit the Dafan Mountain and return Feixu to its rightful owner.”

“Good.” Wen Qing nodded, then settled in the carriage. A Jin soldier standing next to the carriage shut the door, then patted the side of the car. At this, the driver urged the two horses in front of them and the carriage left the camp with a jolt. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with Lan JingYi.

“Don’t worry.” Lan JingYi said. “We will save them.” He said with conviction.

“Not just them.” Jin Ling added, visibly not looking towards his father. Lan SiZhui smiled at them and nodded.



It was four days later that the rest of the Sects had arrived. During that time Jin Ling was instructed to practice with the rest of the Jin disciples and Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi had

joined them. Because of this, many Lan also joined the drills and the four days were spent in surprisingly productively. Until four days had passed, everything went quietly and smoothly, their days filled with sword practice, duels and studying.

“We’re not in Lanling now!” Lan SiZhui heard Jin Ling’s voice on the fourth day, from where he was instructing some Lan disciples about the correct sword forms, and he looked over, seeing a smaller group surrounding his friend. He glanced over and exchanged a look with Lan JingYi, who just shrugged.

“I’ll see what this is about.” Lan SiZhui said and Lan JingYi nodded, taking over the training. Lan SiZhui headed towards Jin Ling, who was standing across Jin ZiXuan, his hands crossed over his chest.

“You have no right to tell me what to do!” Jin Ling told him and Lan SiZhui frowned, finally arriving next to him.

“Jin Ling.” He said quietly, putting a hand on his arm. Jin Ling shook him off, taking a step back.

“Lan SiZhui, can you believe this? He’s sending out a group to attack a Wen settlement not far from here, but he won’t let me go with!”

“Jin Ling, you’re—”

“Don’t tell me I’m too young for this!” Jin Ling snapped. “If he can go, why can’t I?!”

“Young Master Jin is going?” Lan SiZhui looked over at the other, surprised. Jin ZiXuan cocked an eyebrow. While he was young, Jin ZiXuan always emitted an aura of a spoiled man, it was easy to forget he was about the same age as Jin Ling.

“I am the Young Master of the Jin Sect, so naturally, I am going.” Jin ZiXuan said. “We don’t need you.” He addressed Jin Ling.

“Well, if that’s so, I’m in fact the Sect—”

“Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui glared at his friend, frightened.

“So, your Lan XiChen can know, but my own— Mm!” Jin Ling glared at him, then took a step back and drew his sword, pointing it at Lan SiZhui’s chest. “Mmm!”

“Young Mistress, what the fuck?!” Lan JingYi landed next to Lan SiZhui, pulling him back from Xianzi’s point.

“Mm! Mm!” Jin Ling shook his sword at Lan SiZhui, who felt his face heat.

“It wasn’t me.” Lan SiZhui told Lan JingYi.

“It was me.” Came an unexpected voice from behind them, and everyone turned to look at Lan XiChen, who elegantly stepped off Shuoyue, which then returned to its scabbard at Lan

XiChen's hip. Behind him, Lan WangJi, Jiang FengMian, Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng also landed. "I apologize, Jin Ling." He smiled at the boy, who glared back at him.

"Sect Leader Lan, Sect Leader Jiang." Jin ZiXuan bowed to them, and realizing they were rude, Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and the others on the practice field also did the same, except Jin Ling, who kept glaring at Lan XiChen.

"It is good to see all of you well. Lan SiZhui, Young Master Jin sent word that the rescue was successful, but afterwards we didn't have opportunity to exchange letters. How are your cousins doing?"

"Ah, ZeWu-Jun, thanks for the question." Lan SiZhui bowed to him. "Master Hua treated them well, they're actually on their way to safety."

"They didn't want to go to the Cloud Recesses?" Lan XiChen looked troubled by that. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I see..." Lan XiChen sighed, seemingly thoughtful. Then, he shook off his mood and turned back to Jin ZiXuan. "Young Master Jin, thank you for aiding my disciple in his mission. I understand without your help they wouldn't have been able to fight back."

"I wouldn't say that..." Lan JingYi grumbled from the side, but it only got an elbow in his side from Lan SiZhui and an amused look from Lan XiChen.

"As you can see, we've arrived. The others headed straight to the camp, but we saw you out here and thought we'd say hi."

"We can go back if you wish, Sect Leader Lan." Jin ZiXuan said. "I'll have tea prepared for us." He glanced towards one of the Jin disciples who was standing around, originally just to watch the drama between Jin ZiXuan and Jin Ling. The disciple looked startled at that look, then quickly bowed and then hurried away.

"Ah, you're planning to attack one of the Wen settlements nearby, right?" Jiang FengMian asked. Jin ZiXuan nodded. "Then why don't you take Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian with you too, they have been very successful in their attacks so far." Lan SiZhui smiled, looking over at the two, but then he got confused when Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, looking away from Wei WuXian and Wei WuXian looked the other direction, playing with a strand of hair.

"What's your problem?" Lan JingYi, tactful as always, addressed the two loudly. "You just got praised by your Sect Leader, shouldn't you be preening?"

At this, Jiang Cheng shot him a sharp look and Wei WuXian cleared his throat awkwardly. "Right!" He said, clearly with forced cheerfulness. "Thanks, Sect Leader Jiang! Ah, Lan Zhan, why don't we go have some of that tea the Pea—uh, cough, Jin ZiXuan offered us just now? Come on!" He reached out, taking hold of Lan WangJi's hand, then pulled him away from the practice field, back towards the camp. Lan WangJi let himself be pulled. Jiang Cheng scoffed after them, then mumbled something under his breath. He turned back to the group watching them and bowed.

“Excuse me, I’ll go make sure he doesn’t offend everyone.” He said, then without waiting for an answer, rushed after the two.

“What’s with them?” Lan JingYi asked, only loud enough for Lan SiZhui to hear. Lan SiZhui shrugged, then Lan XiChen pulled their attention away from the scene.

“Right, Young Master Jin, this tea you’ve offered, I’d like to have some. First, however, I need to talk to my disciples and Jin Ling, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“Hm.” Jin ZiXuan looked over at Jin Ling with a calculating look, then nodded and bowed to Lan XiChen. “Of course. Then I’ll lead Sect Leader Jiang there, and I trust these disciples to guide you over when you’re done.” He said, gesturing to Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi, who both bowed to him and Jiang FengMian as they left.

Once they were gone, the four of them were left alone. Lan XiChen made a gesture and inclined his head towards Jin Ling.

“Jin Ling, I apologize for the spell.”

“You better.” Jin Ling fumed, obviously holding back his rage.

“Jin Ling, the truth is, if Jin ZiXuan learns even just a small fact about the future, there is a high chance he will never marry your mother. I’m confident you do not wish to be wiped out of time as we know it, so please, do not reveal him where you’re from.”

This seemed to have some effect on Jin Ling, thought he still didn’t look nor convinced, nor relaxed.

“Sect Leader Lan, it is true Jin Ling’s parents shouldn’t know where he was from, but what about everyone else?” Lan JingYi asked in a wondering tone. “What if Lan SiZhui shared it with his cousins, would that also wipe him from time as we know it?”

“This is theoretical, correct?” Lan XiChen looked over at Lan SiZhui, who nodded seriously. Lan XiChen nodded, then sighed. “The truth is, there’s no telling. It is safest if no one else knows about this, even me having this knowledge is dangerous. If an enemy would to grasp this information, can you imagine what would happen?”

“But Jin ZiXuan isn’t our enemy!” Jin Ling glared at him. Lan JingYi snorted.

“The way you talk to him, you could’ve fooled me.”

“Shut up!” Jin Ling glared at him. “I don’t hate him. Don’t speak of things you know nothing about!”

“Of course not. He hates you instead!”

“JingYi!” Lan SiZhui glared at his friend sternly, who just shrugged at the reprimand.

“Even if he hates me, I’ll protect him. There’s nothing wrong with that.” Jin Ling said, defiantly.



“Of course. Which is why I will suggest him to take the three of you with himself on this next attack. Also, once we’ve gotten our bearings, Jin Ling, it would be best if you joined the Jin army. Even though Jin ZiXuan is a high-ranking representative of his Sect, as far as ranking goes, I can give him suggestions that... are unquestionably going to come true.”

“Like what?” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Like taking you to every mission he goes.” Lan XiChen cocked arrogant eyebrows, and for the first time, Jin Ling looked kind of defeated.

“Whatever.” He grumbled.

“Right. With this out of the way, I believe I was promised tea.” Lan XiChen smiled at them pleasantly, and Jin Ling rolled his eyes, pushing past the Lan to lead the way back to the camp.

## Resentment III.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As they returned to the camp, Lan SiZhui noted the little settlement they got used to in the past few days had completely transformed in the matter of a few minutes. There were new tents pulled up, the headcount on the field tripled and it was much louder as well. Lan SiZhui briefly wondered how long they plan to stay, to have settled so well, but then he thought perhaps if the tents were so quickly put up, they can be disassembled just as quickly.

Jin Ling led them towards the dining pavilion, and this, too, changed, Lan SiZhui noted; instead of the small pavilion with place enough for four or five people, now it was a room worthy to call a hall. Inside, Jin ZiXuan, Jiang FengMian, Jiang Cheng and Lan WangJi were already waiting, sharing what seemed like polite conversation and tea.

“Ah, Sect Leader Lan, we’ll leave you to it.” Lan SiZhui said in front of the pavilion, bowing to Lan XiChen. After a second, Lan XiChen gently touched his elbows, bringing him out of his bow.

“Don’t be foolish. Come, we have a lot to discuss.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui, who was surprised by the invitation.

“Yes.” They went up to the table, the juniors bowing to their elders. Once they sat, they were also served tea, the same female servant who brought Lan SiZhui and Jin ZiXuan tea the other day smiling warmly at them as she filled their cups.

“Jin Ling.” Jin ZiXuan said, and Jin Ling looked up from where he sat next to Lan JingYi, frowning.

“What?”

“Sit here.” Jin ZiXuan gestured at the place next to him without looking at Jin Ling.

“Why?” Jin Ling scoffed.

“You’re a Jin disciple. Don’t embarrass your Sect.”

“How am I—” Jin Ling raised his voice, then was interrupted:

“Jin Ling, Young Master Jin is right. You should go, sit with him.” Lan XiChen smiled at Jin Ling, who glared at him. It took Lan SiZhui a moment to realize Lan XiChen was teasing Jin Ling and he had to cover up his chuckle.

“Stop laughing!” Jin Ling snapped as he stood. “I don’t want to sit with you lot anyways.” Jin Ling mumbled, then went over and sat by Jin ZiXuan’s side, though his face reddened and he refused to look at his father.

Lan XiChen also let out an amused little huff and as Lan SiZhui looked over, they shared a look.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, I’ve heard that Lady Wen and brother Wen had been rescued but departed a few days prior.” Jiang FengMian said. Lan SiZhui smiled and nodded.

“Wen Ning has some injuries that worry me, but otherwise they seem fine.”

“Mn.” Jiang FengMian nodded. “Hua Qing informed me about the extent of his injuries. I’m saddened to hear it.” Lan SiZhui suddenly recalled that Hua Qing was Jiang FengMian’s personal healer and wondered if Jiang FengMian knew that they also knew each other with Wen Qing and Wen Ning. Although if Wen Qing didn’t recognize Madam Yu, then surely, they haven’t met before, so chances that Jiang FengMian had met them while they visited Hua Qing in Yunmeng was small.

“Wen Ning has low cultivation, but he is brave and strong. I have no doubt he will recover fine.” Lan SiZhui answered with a smile and Jiang FengMian returned it.

“That’s good to hear.”

“Sect Leader Lan,” Jin ZiXuan began after a pause, once polite conversation was over, “you’ve arrived a few days before we expected.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen inclined his head. “It is due to our accomplishments in the east. We have expected the Wen to show more resistance, but after a few losses, they actually began to draw back towards Qishan.” He explained. “I’ve exchanged some letters with Sect Leader Nie and he also reported that they were successful in driving out Wen forces from Qinghe. Wen Xu had fled back to Qishan and with him went his soldiers, so now Sect Leader Nie and his men are working on getting the remaining forces out of their territory.”

“If this campaign remains to go like this, we will be in Qishan in less than a month.” Jiang FengMian added. Lan SiZhui frowned and exchanged a look with Jin Ling.

It was true that in the future they learned the Sunshot Campaign took a long time to finish, but now Lan SiZhui was wondering if perhaps it was due to the slaughter of the Jiang Sect that it took so long. After all, back then the Jiang Sect was in pieces and while Jiang Cheng joined the Sunshot Campaign, he couldn’t contribute the war with large numbers; more so, his support was less than the Jin Sect’s, which was saying something, considering back then the Jin Sect hadn’t even joined the war until much later. This was also another point where history might’ve turned; Lan SiZhui wasn’t even sure how Jin ZiXuan brought so many soldiers, but looking around the camp, it was clear he showed up with large numbers.

While it was good to hear they’ve moved much quicker than in Lan SiZhui’s past, it was also somewhat worrying – it gave Lan SiZhui a sense of something wasn’t right.

“It is understandable that the Wen are retreating; faced with the four great Sects, they can hardly fight back.” Jin ZiXuan agreed.

“What about the puppets?” Jin Ling asked, still looking over the table at Lan SiZhui, who nodded in agreement. Another big part of the war was that Wen RuoHan’s undead army was harder to beat back than his regular soldiers.

“What puppets?” Jiang FengMian inquired.

“Wen RuoHan... Ah, does Sect Leader Jiang not know?” Lan SiZhui looked over at Lan XiChen, but he shook his head.

“He knows.” He reassured. “Wen RuoHan is in possession of the ancient artifact called the Yin Iron.” Lan XiChen told Jin ZiXuan, who looked confusedly at him. “It is a resentful energy filled tool that makes him able to create and control puppets and such.”

“And you suspect he is going to use it in the war?” Jin ZiXuan asked and Jiang FengMian answered:

“Young Master Jin, you weren’t informed of this, because at the time it was something concerning only the Sect Leaders, but this artefact had been kept hidden until recently. While you attended the Lan Guest Lectures, Wen RuoHan had sent his sons to gather all the pieces of it – there are four in total. He managed to gather three, and the fourth’s location is still a mystery.”

“If this only concerned the Sect Leaders, how come my disciple knows about it?” Jin ZiXuan gestured at Jin Ling.

“Second Young Master Lan had been tasked to look for the shards before Wen RuoHan could get all of them.” Jiang Cheng inserted. “Wei WuXian also learned about this and knowing his big mouth, he probably told them about it.”

“Ah, that’s not actually true.” Lan JingYi said. “We knew about the Yin Iron before Second Young Master Lan was tasked to find the shards.” Lan SiZhui felt like holding his head.

“And how did *you* know about it?” Jiang Cheng scoffed.

“We’ve read about it.” Lan SiZhui said, recalling this was the same lie he told Lan WangJi in Qishan. “It actually doesn’t matter how we know about it.” He said, frustrated. “While it is true that Wen RuoHan’s soldiers are retreating, I feel like this is only the beginning. It is best to be cautious instead of arrogant.”

“I agree with Lan SiZhui.” Lan XiChen nodded. “It feels like an easy win to have come so far in such a short amount of time. It does not align with what we know of Wen RuoHan’s personality. Young Master Jin perhaps knows this best, for your families had been close in the past.”

Jin ZiXuan nodded. “Wen RuoHan is the type who doesn’t easily give up. My father is the same, that’s why they were always close. In this case I wonder what makes him retreat now.” There was a pause when everyone was thinking, then Lan XiChen drew in a breath that attracted everyone’s attention.

“I have exchanged letters with Sect Leader Nie and we’ve agreed to meet up as soon as Wen forces had been driven out of the Jiang Sect’s territory. Once we meet up, we shall discuss our strategy for the remainder of the war. I’d like all present to also attend this discussion.”

“What for now?” Lan JingYi asked. “We just attack a few more offices in hopes the Wen will retreat?”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Until we do that, we will keep questioning the prisoners for information about Wen RuoHan’s plans. Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu are not speaking, but perhaps their men will.” At this, the Sect Leaders agreed and the discussion was considered to be over. As it was, Lan XiChen turned to Jin ZiXuan. “Young Master Jin, you planned on attacking some Wen settlements before we’ve arrived.”

“Yes.” Jin ZiXuan nodded. “We’ve been spying on this office for a few days now and we believe this is one of those offices where the Wen hide their reinforcements. If we attacked it, the rest of the campaign should go smoother for the time being.”

“Then please, see that you do. If you wish, we can lend you some more soldiers. Young Master Jiang and Wei have also offered their help.”

“Sect Leader Lan, while I appreciate the help, it is best if only a small group goes, so we don’t make a scene.” Jin ZiXuan said. “Your disciples already offered their support. We’ve fought side-by-side before, so we make a good team.”

“Young Master Jin, why can’t we go?” Jiang Cheng frowned. “You don’t have to rely on your own now. Wei WuXian and I have been productive. It is best to use all your resources for the fight.”

“Young Master Jiang, it’s not that I don’t want you to come.” Jin ZiXuan said, deadpan. “It’s just that before you arrived, I’ve already decided who to bring. Because my disciple is noisy, he will come and these two Lan brothers not only attached themselves to him, but are also extremely resourceful. For me, it’s enough to bring these people. If you join, I’d have to rethink my plan and we’ve already came up with one.”

“Ah, of course, this is Young Master Jin’s decision, since this is his operation.” Jiang FengMian said with a smile as he subtly placed a hand on his son’s arm to stop him from speaking up. Jiang Cheng glared at Jin ZiXuan but as per his father’s wish, remained quiet.

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded, looking over at Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui. “Then, thank you for the trouble, Young Master Jin.”

“Of course. My disciples are ready, only a few more needs to gather their gear, so perhaps we should depart soon.” Jin ZiXuan stood and with him, Jin Ling did as well.

“Ah, I still need some things from my tent.” Lan JingYi jumped on his feet as well.

“We await your return. If you run into trouble, don’t hesitate to send up a flare, we’ll rush to your aid.” Lan XiChen told Jin ZiXuan as he, too, stood to bow to the other. With these

parting words, the Jin and Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui left the pavilion. As soon as they were out of hearing range, Lan JingYi turned to them.

“I’ll go, get my things. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“We’ll be here.” Jin ZiXuan gestured at a smaller group of Jin soldiers not far, and Lan JingYi hastened a bow before rushing off. Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan headed towards the soldiers, Lan SiZhui trailing behind them. He already had everything he needed from the practice, so he didn’t need anything. He suspected Lan JingYi left his talismans at the tent, so that was understandable.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui!” Lan SiZhui heard a familiar voice call out and as he looked over, he saw Wei WuXian sitting at a table in front of a tent. He was not alone, three or four purple-clad soldiers also sat beside him. Lan SiZhui stopped, and Jin Ling also halted, looking over. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look, but seeing they still had to wait for Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui went over. As he neared, he heard Wei WuXian argue with the soldiers:

“Don’t say that about Lan SiZhui. While it’s true that most Lan are stuffy and boring, Lan SiZhui’s company is fine.”

“Young Master Wei.” He bowed to the other man as he arrived next to the table, ignoring the words just spoken. He noticed that there were several jars of liquor on the table.

“Lan SiZhui, come, sit with us! These are some of my favorite liquors, let’s share some!” Wei WuXian grinned at him and Lan SiZhui repressed a smile. He bowed again.

“Young Master Wei, I’m afraid I cannot join you this time.”

“So boring.” Wei WuXian pouted and Lan SiZhui repressed yet another smile. “Ah, Lan SiZhui, what did you talk about with the Sect Leaders?”

“Young Master Wei, if you were interested in the discussion, why didn’t you come?” Lan SiZhui blinked at him. Wei WuXian rolled his eyes, reaching for a bottle and filling his cup.

“These discussions are long and boring and often their point can be summarized in a few words. Why would I endure it just to hear a sentence or two?” He wriggled his eyebrows at Lan SiZhui, raising his cup then throwing back the liquor. Lan SiZhui felt fond and he shook his head.

“Young Master Wei is right. There wasn’t much we discussed, just the strategy of the war.” He teased.

“Eh?!” Wei WuXian gaped at him. “If I knew it was that kind of discussion, I’d have joined!”

“Well...” Lan SiZhui began, but before he could finish, he heard his name called from the side. As he looked over, he saw that Lan JingYi had arrived and now he stood amongst the Jin disciples, turned towards where Lan SiZhui stood.

“Lan SiZhui! Coming?” Jin Ling called over and Lan SiZhui made an affirmative gesture before turning back to Wei WuXian.

“I’m afraid I have to go. I’ll talk to you later, Young Master Wei.” He bowed, then after receiving bows from the Jiang disciples, headed towards Jin Ling. Before he could take three steps though, Wei WuXian called out.

“Ah, wait, Lan SiZhui!” Lan SiZhui turned back and saw Wei WuXian getting up to hurry over. Once Wei WuXian reached him, he lowered his voice. “Where are you going?”

“Young Master Jin had planned on attacking a Wen office not far from here before the lot of you arrived.” Lan SiZhui explained. “We’re going there now.”

“Ah, I see. Let me get my sword.”

“Young Master Wei, it’s alright. You don’t need to come with. You’ve just arrived and between fighting nonstop for the past few days and traveling, I’m sure you’re tired. Stay and rest up.” He didn’t want to say, but he suspected the other reason Jin ZiXuan rejected the idea of the Yunmeng disciples coming with was that he disliked Wei WuXian.

“You talk like my sister.” Wei WuXian pouted, but didn’t seem particularly eager to push the issue. “Say, Lan SiZhui, will you fight with resentful energy?” He asked even quieter. Lan SiZhui frowned at him.

“Young Master Wei, I’m not using those methods anymore. It’s not proper, besides, it is harmful long-term. I used it before because I had no other choice.”

“I see...” Wei WuXian hummed, looking away, rubbing the side of his nose. Lan SiZhui stepped back and bowed again.

“I’ll get going then.”

“Alright.” Wei WuXian nodded, watching him as Lan SiZhui hurried over to Jin Ling.

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The plan was simple and easily executed. The archers who came with them, with the lead of one of the disciples, Han Ming – when Jin Ling heard the name, his eyes widened and he stared at the man like he’d seen a ghost – would shoot lit arrows inside the office. Once the buildings were on fire and the Wen were concentrated on that instead of external threats, the troops would move in and the battle would begin.

It went down much like how Jin ZiXuan imagined it to go. The battle was straightforward and with half the settlement on fire, the Wen didn’t have the luxury to fight back with all their attention. It made it much easier to get rid of the troops and in the end, Jin ZiXuan stood amongst the burned down buildings, a group of twenty or so people who’d either given up the fight or weren’t fighting in the first place were kneeling in front of them, hands and feet bound, stripped to their innermost layers.

Looking at them, Lan SiZhui’s mouth formed a thin line and his hand on Yingjiu tightened. It wasn’t that he felt sorry for them, for they were, for all that was worth, his enemies. But every time he saw the black inner robes, he thought of his own, the ones Wen Qing lent him

so long ago. When he saw a wounded, he thought of Wen Ning, brushing off his concerns. For all they were enemies, for all they hated him for betraying his birth family, in a way, they were still family. It was hard to see their pitiful states.

“What will happen to them now?” Lan JingYi asked Jin ZiXuan and Lan SiZhui was grateful he didn’t have to be the one asking.

“We have already began arranging places for them to stay confined and supervised.” Jin ZiXuan said and Lan SiZhui thought of Qionggi Path. His brows furrowed, but he remained quiet.

“Who will supervise them?” Jin Ling asked with a frown, also looking at the prisoners.

“For now, MeishanYu and YunmengJiang.” Jin ZiXuan answered. “Since they’re still recovering from the battle at Lotus Pier, however well they’re doing, they are the only ones with enough force to keep them contained while the rest of us are fighting.” Jin ZiXuan paused, then turned away from the Wen. “Ten of our men will stay to bring them back. Let us go back to the camp and await Sect Leader Lan’s decision about our next move.”

With this, the battle was over. Lan SiZhui cast one last look towards the Wen, then followed Jin ZiXuan and his friends.



After this battle, the armies of the three Sects moved on from YiLing. Lan SiZhui was somewhat sentimental to leave this place, but he knew they couldn’t operate the whole war from here. They kept moving towards northwest, driving out Wen forces from the Jiang Sect’s territory as they had planned.

While during their time in YiLing the armies often mixed and everyone worked together, once they left, Lan XiChen saw it better if most kept to their own Sect and so, Jin Ling left to stay with the Jin troops.

“Are you sure this is fine?” Lan JingYi asked as he was sitting on his bed, already packed. The only thing they needed to disassemble were the tents, but the Sects brought several servants to do that. “Shouldn’t we stay together?”

“Lan JingYi, I have to protect my father. I won’t stay with the Lan Sect just because you’re clingy.” Jin Ling scoffed as he packed the last of his talismans away. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“We will participate in the same battles, so when there’s danger, we can all look out for him. I just mean, with your temper, is it wise to stay with the Jin?”

“What do you know about my temper?!” Jin Ling snapped, glaring at Lan JingYi. “Maybe we’ve become a little too close if you think you have the right to make comments like this, Lan JingYi.”

“Nonsense.” Lan JingYi huffed. “We’re close. I always make comments like this.”



“Well, you shouldn’t.” Jin Ling said, turning away. “You weren’t there, but while I’ve been looking for Lan SiZhui, nobody suspected anything.”

“But just a few days ago on the practice field—”

“Lan XiChen already said if I tell him, I might mess up my chances for being born. So, I won’t.” Jin Ling answered defiantly and Lan SiZhui looked towards Lan JingYi to see his reaction. Unfortunately, his friend also turned towards him.

“Do you have nothing to add, SiZhui?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Really?” At this, even Jin Ling turned to look at him. Lan SiZhui smiled at them.

“While I also have worries about what you might let slip while you’re staying with the Jin, I’m also confident that you can control yourself. I also wouldn’t dare to tell you not to spend time with your father.”

“Who wants to spend time with him?!” Jin Ling glared. “He’s arrogant and spoiled with a bad temper and fancy words. I don’t even understand how mother could stand to marry him.”

“Aren’t you the same?” Lan JingYi muttered under his breath.

“I might have been.” Jin Ling nodded, showing a rare moment of maturity. “But since then, I’ve changed.”

“That was less than two years ago.” Lan JingYi said.

“Well, two years ago I haven’t met Wei WuXian, have I?!” This surprised Lan SiZhui, and as he exchanged a look with Lan JingYi, he saw this also surprised his friend as well.

“What do you mean?” Lan JingYi asked. “You’re saying meeting Wei WuXian humbled you?”

“Of course not!” Jin Ling snapped. “I’m saying that things are more complicated than being the son of a Sect Leader and drinking fancy tea.” He huffed, looking away. “Why are we talking about this anyways.” He turned back. “Don’t you have to pack?”

“I’m done with it, so is SiZhui. We’re just waiting for you now.”

“Well, then let’s go.” Jin Ling pulled the bag on his shoulder and headed outside. After exchanging a look, the two Lan followed him.

“This is goodbye then.” Lan JingYi said.

“JingYi, Jin Ling will live in the same camps as us and we’ll also battle together and go to meetings. The only time we will be apart will be at night.”

“Well, I’m going to miss his snoring!”

“I don’t snore!” Jin Ling glared.

“You do so.” Lan JingYi grinned at him. “Ask one of the Jin brothers once you spent a night with them and they will also tell you!”

“You—! I’ll break your legs!”

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The next two weeks or so were spent in a similar fashion. Even though Lan SiZhui told Jin Ling and Lan JingYi that they’ll see each other often, they had many different missions as well. It didn’t take them long to drive all Wen forces out of Jiang territory and soon, they found themselves in a discussion with the Sect Leaders once again. Even though there were more experienced and higher ranking disciples present, Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui were invited to the discussion once again. Han Ming was also present as well as Lan WangJi, and in addition to Jiang Cheng, Wei WuXian also stood by Jiang FengMian’s side. Because of them having been split up, it had been a while since Lan SiZhui saw either Jiang boys.

“Sect Leader Lan, we’re finally closing in on the Dafan Mountains. Here only civilians live and we shouldn’t expect much resistance. What should our next step be?” Jiang FengMian asked, once everyone had arrived and the tent they held this meeting in had been closed properly, and a silencing spell had been cast.

“I say we go and meet up Sect Leader Nie.” Han Ming offered. When they’ve arrived, Jin Ling told Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui in low voices that the other man used to be his archery instructor until Jiang Cheng visited him at Koi Tower one day and saw them practice, scoffed, then brought over a Jiang disciple from Yunmeng just to train Jin Ling in archery. Han Ming didn’t take it well, but at the same time, he was proud of his former student becoming the second-best archer in Lanling, so their relationship was fairly good. “He is supposed to be at the borders as well, isn’t he?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Jin Ling chimed in, frowning at the man.

“Jin Ling.” Jin ZiXuan turned his head and spoke quietly.

“Ah, Young Master Jin, I don’t know if you’re aware, but Both Sect Leader Jiang and I agree that Jin Ling has good insights when it comes to strategy.” Lan XiChen chimed in. “Perhaps we could listen to it?”

“Hm.” Jin ZiXuan clearly disagreed, but he just turned forward and didn’t say more.

“Uh...” Jin Ling, for a moment, looked somewhat unsure, as if it wasn’t moments ago he’d thought he knew better. He must’ve anticipated that he’d have to fight teeth and nails to say his piece and now, faced with a free way, he didn’t know how to proceed. But as always, he recovered quickly. He stepped forward, then hesitated for another moment before bowing to Jiang FengMian and Lan XiChen. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a surprised look; it wasn’t Jin Ling’s character to be so polite.

“Sect Leaders Jiang and Lan, I think it would be best if we proceed with caution. While it’s true that Wen forces had been driven out from Jiang and Nie jurisdiction, but between Qishan and the seas there’s plenty of grounds. Who knows who is hiding there, waiting to attack us from behind while we head towards Qishan?”

“So, what’s brother Jin’s suggestion?” Jiang FengMian asked, curious.

“Perhaps we should lead troops there first, secure the area before going towards Qishan.”

“We don’t have these kinds of forces.” Jin ZiXuan said.

“We don’t need a whole army!” Jin Ling told him. “Just some people who know what they’re doing, and we don’t need to look everywhere, just see if an army is waiting anywhere.”

“It wouldn’t be bad to secure our backs.” Wei WuXian agreed with a nod and Jiang Cheng frowned at him.

“You cannot go. Remember? You promised.”

They ignored everyone’s curious looks as Wei WuXian laughed awkwardly, throwing an arm around Jiang Cheng’s shoulders. “Jiang Cheng, no need to bring this up, I didn’t say I wanted to go.”

Jiang Cheng shook off his arm, crossing his own across his chest. Lan SiZhui and his friends exchanged a look. Lan SiZhui had already noticed some tension between them when they met in YiLing, but he was surprised their fight was still going, and it seemed to be more than just Jiang Cheng’s general distaste towards Wei WuXian’s usual antics. It was somewhat familiar – the way Jiang Cheng seemed genuinely upset with Wei WuXian, not just those token protests he’d been making since the three of them had arrived to the past. Lan SiZhui wondered what it was they were fighting about, but since it was hardly his business, he kept quiet.

“I also agree.” Lan WangJi broke the sudden, silent tension.

“Then we will pick a group of people and send them to investigate the lands between us and the seas. I’ll also advise Sect Leader Nie to do the same.” Lan XiChen nodded.

“It will most likely take some time. What do you suggest we do in the meantime?” Jiang FengMian asked.

“Well, I don’t think it would hurt to meet up with Sect Leader Nie, still. At least like that, we could all discuss without needing to wait for our letters to arrive. Also, while we wait for the reports, the disciples could take a rest. Spring is upon us and they’ve been fighting for the past month or so.”

“We could also start smaller attacks like the one Young Master Jin had done back in YiLing.” Lan JingYi inserted. “That way while we wait, we also keep the Wen busy and move forward.”

“Mn.” Jin ZiXuan nodded in favor of this.

“Very well then. It is still some time until we meet up with Sect Leader Nie.” Lan XiChen summarized. “Thank you for everyone’s input. You may go now.”



It took almost a month to finally meet up with Nie MingJue. Since the meeting point was at the southeastern border of the Wen Sect and Nie MingJue was at the Nie border, he still had to cover some distance and fight his way through some Wen forces to get to where the rest of the Sects were waiting for him. Lan XiChen had offered they would go to Qinghe to meet up, but Nie MingJue declined, claiming if the weakened Lan and Jiang Sects could make it there on their own, the intact Nie Sect should have no problem making it on their own as well. Still, ignoring the other man’s pride, Lan XiChen sent some men ahead and with their help, Nie MingJue arrived to the three Sects’ camp without any major losses to his own forces.

As the fourth Sect had arrived to the border, Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling watched as the fourth Sect’s army made their own place in the camp, creating a sea of white tents in the valley they were staying at. Looking at the countless carriages going to and fro, at the different training grounds set up, where several bigger and smaller Sects and Clans disciples were showing off their martial arts, Lan SiZhui felt the war only now began in earnest.

“What do you think that is for?” Jin Ling asked as they watched a Nie carriage stop near the main tents and unload a huge chest from the cart. Poor horses seemed exhausted from the journey.

“They’re taking it towards the supply tent.” Lan JingYi observed. Some Nie disciples were sitting atop horses and directing the men, pointing with their sabers here and there, shouting commands the three of them couldn’t make out from their perch. They were standing near the hill where the tactical tent was set up for privacy, having come here on Lan JingYi’s initiative in order to have a better look at the incoming Nie forces.

“You think it’s food?” Jin Ling frowned, but for once, not at Lan JingYi.

“Maybe sweets for our efforts.” Lan JingYi said dreamily. “Or meat.”

“You don’t even eat meat.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“The Lan Sect doesn’t eat meat. My personal tastes may differ.” Lan JingYi answered arrogantly.

“And you?” Jin Ling nodded towards Lan SiZhui with his chin.

“Occasionally.” He nodded.

“Lan SiZhui’s adoptive father always gave him some freedom with the rules.” Lan JingYi explained. “That’s why I was also allowed to eat meat sometimes. Ah, also I think when you were little, you were sickly and thin and he wanted you to gain weight.”

“I wasn’t sickly. I just had poor health due to my childhood.” Lan SiZhui defended.

“Hmph, who would’ve thought, the great model disciples of the Lan Sect, so loose with their rules.” Jin Ling shook his head, turning back to their view. “It looks heavy. Maybe it’s gold.”

“Why would anyone bring gold to a war?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“What are you buying food for? Certainly not your looks, nor your brain.”

“I let you know I’m the seventh ranked in Gusu.” Lan JingYi said proudly. “Where do you rank?”

“I’m young. I don’t need to think about marriage, unlike you.”

“Why do you keep pushing me to find a wife?” Lan JingYi frowned at his friend.

“If you find a wife, perhaps you’ll annoy her instead of me.”

“I don’t think it’s gold.” Lan SiZhui mentioned, desperate to change the topic. “Maybe weapons?”

“What kind of weapons? Everyone has their swords.” Jin Ling huffed, like he found the idea ridiculous.

“You don’t.” Lan JingYi countered.

“Mine is not mine now. I can’t help it.”

“It’s liquor.” Came a familiar voice from behind them, and the three of them jumped a little at the unexpected guests. Turning around, they bowed to Lan XiChen, who waved them off. Next to him stood Nie MingJue as well.

“Sect Leader Lan, Sect Leader Nie.” The boys echoed.

“It’s for tonight.” Nie MingJue said. “XiChen mentioned you’ve drank the nearby villages out of their alcohol, so I thought I should bring some, in apology and thanks for waiting for us as well as a little celebration to having made this far. From here on our journey will not be as idle as it had been so far. Let us have this night for ourselves before we move inside the enemy’s lines.”

“The Lan Sect doesn’t even drink alcohol.” Jin ling scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. Nie MingJue inclined his head.

“That is true. However, they still know how to have fun. Don’t they?” Lan XiChen chuckled quietly into his sleeve and nodded.

“They do. Boys, have you met Sect Leader Nie yet?”

“We’ve crossed paths before, haven’t we?” Nie MingJue studied the three of them. “I seem to recall a group of three disciples who arrived just before the Wen indoctrination. They were panicked they would be late and left quickly.”

“It’s not our fault.” Jin Ling said, slightly arrogantly. “We had been looking for the Yin Iron at the time and didn’t realize the time, so we were in a rush.”

“I see. XiChen mentioned you three play an important role in the war. I am looking forward to fight by your sides.” Nie MingJue told them and the three of them bowed. By the time they straightened up, the two Sect Leaders were gone.



By the time night rolled around, the whole camp was in an excited buzz about the celebration. While most soldiers would receive their liquor and keep their celebrations to their quarters, the more important people were invited to the main tent. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui also received invitations, so as late afternoon rolled around, they set out.

Inside the tent, instead of the strategies that had been discussed here, now stood several tables.

Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian were present from the Jiang Sect as well as a disciple in MeishanYu robes Lan SiZhui didn’t recognize. From the Jin Sect, Han Ming was by Jin ZiXuan’s side, and another Jin disciple Lan SiZhui didn’t recognize. He slightly resembled Jin ZiXuan, but other than that, Lan SiZhui had no other clues about the person. Lan WangJi stood next to his brother, but it didn’t seem like he enjoyed being there. There were two other Nie disciples as well, who were discussing something with Nie MingJue closely. Several smaller Clan Leaders and members were also present, but Lan SiZhui only recognized Su MuShi and Su She next to him.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui!” Wei WuXian grinned at them as they entered and came closer, abandoning his Sects’ representatives without a word. Jiang Cheng looked after him, but then turned back to his father.

“Young Master Wei.” Lan SiZhui bowed.

“You will finally drink with me?” Wei WuXian grinned, but Lan SiZhui shook his head with a smile.

“We’re all here now?” Nie MingJue asked as he looked through the people gathered in the tent. “Good. Please, take your seats.” As they did, servants entered the tent and quickly contributed several jars of alcohol much to Wei WuXian’s delight, and several pots of tea for the Lan Sect disciples. Next, a disciple entered in grey robes. His face was elegant and impassive, his form slim and delicate. He held a pipa in his hand and bowed to them before settling in the middle of the tent and began playing.

Lan JingYi shared a giddy look with Lan SiZhui. While they had their share of watching artists at their time, as junior disciples they were barely invited to more important Sect meetings, and never really experienced the play of real masters. Next to them, Jin Ling looked somewhat bored. He was probably used to such displays. Actually, looking around the room, Lan SiZhui realized only him and Lan JingYi showed such interest in the play, but before he could feel embarrassed about their inexperience, he caught Lan XiChen’s gaze, who was looking at them with an understanding gentleness. Still, he pulled back Lan JingYi,

who was inelegantly leaning over the table to hear more. Once the song was concluded, Lan JingYi grinned widely and clapped his hands enthusiastically. He was the only one.

“Haha, that’s right!” Nie MingJue chuckled, looking at Lan JingYi with some indescribable expression that was somewhere between approval and pride. “Xiao Feng’s play is truly deserving of applaud!” He said as he also began clapping. His good mood seemed to transfer to the others as well, and soon everyone clapped Xiao Feng, who seemed embarrassed about it. He bowed low, then thanked them for the audience in a quiet voice before going to the side where the Nie disciples were sitting, taking his place among them.

“Now, friends, let us raise our cups!” Nie MingJue said as he stood up with his cup held high. Everyone in the room followed his example but remained seated. “Today marks the day that the four Sects had joined to defeat evil. Wen RuoHan of Qishan, whom we looked as our brother and many as their savior had turned against the people. He greedily wants to order the Sects and kill us all. He took the Yin Iron that our ancestors had given blood and life to suppress and killed the innocent cruelly. He ordered Wen Xu, Wen Chao, and his men to commit countless crimes, which brought calamity to our Sects. Today, we celebrate our survival, but tomorrow we will storm into their homes and repay what they put us through tenfold!

“Today my friends we’ve gathered, friend and foe working together to defeat the enemy. Shall the heavens bless us and make us victorious! I raise my cup to you, to the heavens and to the people we fight for.” With this, cheers broke out in the tent and everyone drank. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with Lan JingYi and Jin Ling and they nodded to each other. The real war started now.



The next day they were called in front of the main tents. The Four Sects and several smaller Clan’s soldiers stood in neat rows under the gloomy sky that promised rain. At the front, facing them stood the Sect and Clan Leaders, with the four major Sect Leaders in the front. Between the soldiers and them stood some disciples with scrolls in their hands.

One of them stepped forward once everyone had quieted down. His voice rang through the rows of disciples, reading out loud from the scroll. He told them one front would be heading towards the west, those who wanted to join should sign up at this person. The next disciple stepped up once he was done, announcing he will lead troops to the east, everyone who wished to join sign up with him. This went on for two more fronts, then the last one announced the Sect Leaders will march towards Qishan, expecting the other fronts to keep forces off their backs. This would be the main front and everyone who wished to join should sign up with that person.

Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui, who were standing near the front of the Lan disciples shared a look and nodded to each other. In the past weeks they’ve been present when this tactic had been discussed and many of these results came from them and Jin Ling, so this wasn’t new to them.

Once the announcements were made, broke out the chaos of everyone rushing to sign up. Most of them had already discussed where they would go, so it didn’t take long until

everyone was signed up. By the time dinner rolled around, everyone had their fronts selected and packed to leave for it. They would leave tomorrow and travel to their selected locations and begin their campaign.

While they left, those who needn't to travel stayed, as to give them time to arrive before they began their own battles. Not surprisingly, most important figures would stay. Lan SiZhui spotted Wei WuXian lounging in front of the Jiang tents and also saw Su She busying himself in front of the Lan tents.

Three days after the celebration, Nie MingJue led them to the first battlefield in Wen Sect territory. It was still gloomy, the camp hasn't seen sun for a few days now, but it refused to rain. Lan SiZhui hoped this wasn't a foreshadowing of how their battle will go.

"It's a good thing at least, that Wen ZhuLiu and Wen Chao had been taken out from the equation." Nie MingJue said to nobody in particular as he rode his huge horse. When Lan SiZhui saw the animal he hardly believed such a big horse existed. Next to him, Lan XiChen rode a slightly smaller horse elegantly, agreeing quietly.

"Up ahead!" Someone called out from the very front of their little army.

"This is it then." Nie MingJue nodded and pulled out his saber. Seeing Baxia again, Lan SiZhui couldn't help a shudder that run through him, remembering the last time he saw the weapon in Guanyin temple.

"SiZhui." Jin Ling was supposed to be on the other side, and Lan SiZhui jumped a little when the boy approached him quickly.

"What are you doing? Shouldn't you be protecting your— Jin ZiXuan?" Lan JingYi frowned at him.

"I'm an archer, so they put me in the back." Jin Ling said annoyed. "That's why I'm here. Look out for him. I'll try my best, but if it gets chaotic—"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded. "We'll protect him."

"Thanks." Jin Ling nodded at them, turning to go back, then halted. "And yourself too."

"Ah, Young Mistress, you do care about us!" Lan JingYi grinned and Jin Ling glared back at him before rushing back to his place. As Lan SiZhui looked up, he saw Lan XiChen just turn away from them with a smile playing on his lips.

They arrived at a field. It was desolate and dry, not much vegetation blocking their vision from the other side where Wen soldiers gathered. They were not much more than their own, so theoretically, this battle should be decided fairly. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath, breathing in the musky scent of the woods around them, the horses by his side and the fires set up to indicate the middle of the battlefield. He suspected the Wen forces had been waiting here since the four Sects had arrived, because there were already several marks of bonfires around the field.



He exchanged another look with Lan JingYi. It wasn't like this would be their first battle, so they were both calm. Still, Lan SiZhui felt like today was different.

"It is better than expected." Lan XiChen noted as they stood across the Wen forces. "I expected them to protect their borders better."

"It's because they want to protect Qishan, not the borders." Nie MingJue noted. "That's where Wen RuoHan hid himself like a coward. Once we march through their homes, we will arrive to the real battlefield. These people who live here are nothing to them. We could walk all over the dead of their people and they wouldn't bat an eye, as long as Wen RuoHan and his Yin Iron is safe, he could raise his army anytime he wants."

"Well then, let us go to Qishan." Lan XiChen nodded and with this, Nie MingJue signaled. The servant standing behind their horses nodded and rushed back to where the drill drums were secured on the carts they brought with them.

As soon as the drums begin their rhythm, rain started pouring down and the battle began.

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi both looked out for Jin ZiXuan, but soon had to realize they needn't to pay close attention. Not only did he know how to fight, Jiang Cheng, surprisingly, also looked out for him. At once point, they even fought back to back and Lan SiZhui wondered when did this friendship blossom between them. Jin Ling also did an admirable job of shooting down people with Huangfeng, so Jin ZiXuan was well-protected.

Lan SiZhui was almost sure at their victory when everything changed. One moment, he cut down the last Wen soldier in his and Lan JingYi's reach, then he sensed someone swinging a sword at him from behind. He reacted in time and blocked it, but when he looked at his attacker, he almost dropped his sword. From all around him, he suspected others experienced the same thing, because he heard several people call out:

"A-Yao, what are you doing, it's me!"

"Shang Ming, weren't you fatally wounded?!"

"You, I'm on your side, can't you see my purple robes?!"

"Puppets!" Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling called out at the same time.

"How?!" Lan JingYi grunted as he pushed one away from himself. The puppet fell on his back and rolled in an attempt to get up. "Aren't we too far from Qishan?"

"Could Wen RuoHan be nearby?" Jin Ling landed next to them, notching an arrow and shooting it at one of the puppets.

"Mn." Lan SiZhui shook his head, trying to think, but while he also had to fight off the puppets and the remaining Wen soldiers, it wasn't an easy task. "Wen RuoHan has three shards now. The one we had in the Cloud Recesses was only one shard and it was behind strong wards, it still affected some people. Maybe with his three shards, Wen RuoHan's reach is further."

“We’re almost at the border, you mean to tell me he can raise puppets this far out?” Jin Ling scoffed.

“I don’t know.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “But I know that he is not near here.”

“How do you know?” He heard a new voice, and it was Nie MingJue.

“It’s complicated.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, then watched as one of the puppets got a sword in his gut and still walked forward to grab the soldier who stabbed it. The soldier shrieked in fear and let go of the sword, falling back.

“They are impossible to kill!” Nie MingJue said as he cut down a puppet that then stood up again.

“Not impossible.” Lan SiZhui shook his head and exchanged a look with his friends. Lan JingYi looked concerned while Jin Ling had a steely look in his eyes. Lan SiZhui sheathed his sword and pulled out Hudie.

Rain was still pouring down on them, the kind that fell in the spring to bring freshness in the air and water the crops. Lan SiZhui leapt up so he was out of harms’ way and could see the whole battlefield. Hudie floated in front of him, held up by his own spiritual power. With a deep breath, Lan SiZhui placed his fingers on the strings and began to play.

“Kill them while they’re paralyzed!” Jin Ling ordered everyone, then pulled out an arrow and did just that.

“Not all of them are beyond saving yet, so don’t kill those without cracks on their chests!” Lan JingYi joined. Lan SiZhui kept playing, the rainwater keeping his notes sharp and dull at the same time. He’d been thoroughly soaked already, so he hardly noticed the hair sticking to his face, the clothes clinging to his skin.

“Capture the rest, bring them back!” Nie MingJue ordered as only a few puppets remained and all Wen soldiers had been dealt with. They captured the puppets with rope, and Lan SiZhui played the last notes of his melody, returning to the battlefield.

“SiZhui!” Lan JingYi and Jin Ling ran up to him right away. “What were you thinking, didn’t we agree you wouldn’t use... you-know-what before Nightless City?” Lan JingYi hissed to him, grabbing his arm.

“I played *Rest*.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“How did you not recognize it, even I had.” Jin Ling said, crossing his arms across his chest, leaning back. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“If he was playing *Rest*, I’d have recognized it.” Lan JingYi said.

“So...” Jin Ling made a face. “Lan SiZhui just lied into our faces?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I did play *Rest*... only... not the one we know.” He admitted.

“What does that even mean?” Jin Ling screwed up his face in a grimace, but before Lan SiZhui could explain, Lan XiChen came up to them.

“Boys.”

“Sect Leader Lan.” They bowed to him.

“It’s best if we return. Let us not linger here.”

“Mn.” They nodded and followed him where the other soldiers were standing around. Many wounded were sitting on the ground, some disciples with better medical training going around, patching them up as best they could temporarily. Nie MingJue was giving instructions for a group to stay and secure the location. The others would go back to the camp and tend to the wounded and discuss what to do next, since they hadn’t expected to run into puppets this far out from Nightless City.

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By the time they returned to the camp, Sect Leader Jiang was already there with Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian. When they left the camp previously, the Sect Leaders split up, thinking like this, they could cover more ground. On one hand it was surprising that the others have already returned, but on the other hand, if they also ran into puppets, it wasn’t surprising. Nie MingJue ordered the troops to lock away the puppets they returned with and headed towards the main tents, only to discover that near it, several people were laid on the ground, unconscious. Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi were standing over them, conversing in a low tone. When they saw Nie MingJue and his team approaching, they bowed.

“WangJi, Wei WuXian.” Nie MingJue nodded to them. “What happened?”

“These people started turning into puppets as we were battling with the Wen Sect.” Wei WuXian said, gesturing at the bodies with his sword. “They were infected by the Yin Iron.”

“We’ve also met this.” Lan XiChen nodded towards where the puppets they brought back were caged.

“Huh?” Wei WuXian frowned, looking puzzled. “Those puppets look energetic while these ones are unconscious.” He said.

“SiZhui.” Lan XiChen turned his head just enough for Lan SiZhui to know he’d been addressed. He was somewhat alarmed by having been called out, but he went forward and bowed to Lan XiChen’s profile. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“Uh.” Lan SiZhui didn’t expect to be asked, so he shook his head. “I have theories, but I’m not certain.”

“Let us discuss this inside.” Nie MingJue pointed at the main tent, keeping his voice low. “Where is Sect Leader Jiang?” He asked Wei WuXian.

“Already inside.” Wei WuXian stepped to the side to let Nie MingJue enter the tent, then followed him inside. The flap closed behind the lastly entering Lan JingYi, and they were

encouraged to sit. Nie MingJue seemed troubled as he sat at the main table. After tea had been served, he waved the servants out.

“Right.” He nodded, looking around. His gaze settled on Lan XiChen. “This is highly unexpected that Wen RuoHan can reach this far to create puppets. The Lan Sect kept the most records other than the Wen Sect about the Yin Iron, XiChen, do you know how is it possible?”

Lan XiChen was quiet for a moment. “I’m afraid I don’t. I have also read the passages we have about the Yin Iron, but it only describes some atrocities Xue ChongHai had done, nothing certain about its powers.” He paused, then turned to his brother. “WangJi, when you and Young Master Wei were looking for the other shards, have you found out anything about it?”

“Xue ChongHai controlled the Tortoise of Slaughter with it.” Wei WuXian said. “But other than that, the only thing we learned about it, is where the shards had been before.”

“We’ve also encountered puppets.” Lan WangJi said, looking at Wei WuXian, who frowned at him in question. Jiang Cheng next to him nodded.

“I remember. On Dafan mountain, in the Dancing Fairy’s temple, several villagers were turned into puppets.”

“Ah, I remember now.” Wei WuXian said, snapping his fingers in realization. “But... Ah, Wen Chao controlled those puppets with the Yin Iron in the Dire Owl, didn’t he?”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded. “If the Yin Iron’s power can be split up this way, it is possible these puppets were also created the same way.”

“That doesn’t make sense...” Lan SiZhui muttered under his breath, but he probably said it too loudly, because in the next moment, everyone looked towards him.

“SiZhui, did you figure something out?” Lan XiChen asked, encouraging. Once Lan SiZhui noticed everyone looking at him, he felt embarrassed and his face heated. However, at Lan XiChen’s question, he nodded.

“Naturally, I do not know more about the Yin Iron than those present here, so I can only speak in confines of a theory. But I know that much about resentful energy that unless it is controlled, it doesn’t pick sides. Clearly, we’ve been targeted during today’s attack, so clearly, whatever turned the men into puppets were targeting us, for I did not see them attack a Wen soldier. When Second Young Master Lan and Young Master Wei were looking for the Yin Iron shard in the Dafan Mountain, the villagers had been turned into puppets by Wen Chao’s Dire Owl which had the Yin Iron’s energy trapped inside of it.

“Based on this, it is safe to say that today, there was also someone who had some energy from the Yin Iron, controlling the puppets. Perhaps with a Dire Owl, perhaps with some other method they used. However, Wen RuoHan is not a person who easily trusts anyone. He trusted Wen Chao to take control of the Dire Owl, but Wen Chao is now imprisoned.”

“So, who else does Wen RuoHan trust enough to give power of the Yin Iron over?” Jin Ling nodded in agreement.

“If it’s only one person controlling this one shard and he’s here, if we catch him or kill him, we won’t have to deal with the puppets until we reach Nightless City.” Lan JingYi joined.

“When the war began and the Wen forces had been driven out from Qinghe, where did Wen Xu go?” Wei WuXian asked Nie MingJue, who also nodded, following the logic.

“Wen Xu was seen retreating towards Qishan.” He said. “This makes sense. If Wen RuoHan tasked Wen Xu to slow us down by making puppets while we fight, then it is possible he is nearby.” He paused, thinking before looking up. “WangJi, Wei WuXian, do you know how far Wen Chao was when the puppets on Dafan mountain had been created?”

“He wasn’t there in person when we fought the Dire Owl.” Wei WuXian said, seemingly lost in his memories.

“SiZhui, when we were fighting, you said you couldn’t sense Wen RuoHan close by. What did you mean?” Nie MingJue now turned to him. Lan SiZhui felt his face redden once more, but answered:

“Sect Leader Nie, I don’t know if you’re aware, but by birth, I am a Wen. I belong to a smaller, familial branch that lives in the Dafan mountain and focuses on healing.” Lan SiZhui didn’t like to lie, but telling them he grew up in the Burial Mounds would be too much, so instead, he told them what Wen Qing told him a few months before about his spiritual energy. “I grew up near a Yin Iron shard, and because of this, I am more sensitive to resentful energy. If Wen RuoHan had been close by, I’d have been able to sense the Yin Iron he had on him.”

“Ah, I agree with Lan SiZhui.” Wei WuXian nodded, grinning. “It seems our lives were similar, Lan SiZhui. Sect Leader Nie, before the Jiang Sect took me in, I lived near the YiLing Burial Mounds. Having grown up there, I am also more sensitive to the dark energies around. When we fought the puppets just now, I also didn’t sense any strong resentful energy nearby.”

At this, Jiang Cheng muttered something under his breath, but from so afar, Lan SiZhui couldn’t hear what he said. Still, it earned Wei WuXian’s elbow in his side and he hissed, frowning at his brother who glared back at him.

“Boys.” Jiang FengMian placated and the two looked away from each other then.

“So, it is concluded it wasn’t Wen RuoHan nearby.” Lan XiChen said. “Then it is most likely Wen Xu we’re looking for.”

“Then, I suggest we do not continue the raids but look for Wen Xu instead.” Jin ZiXuan said. “It is dangerous to fight when the chance of being turned into puppets hangs over our heads and I never wish to raise my sword against my own ever again.”

“What about those already turned?” Jin Ling asked.

“From what I’ve seen, there are three different stages to this.” Lan SiZhui said. “The first stage is when they just start getting infected, and they’re still energetic, but in their minds, they’re unable to take control. The second stage is when their control is completely taken over by the Yin Iron and the one who commands it. The third stage is complete destruction of the subject’s will. People were not meant to be controlled and once they lose the battle in their heads, their consciousness is destroyed.”

At this, Lan JingYi leaned over, uncomfortably close to Lan XiChen and whispered:

“Ah, you should ask Meng Yao about it when you have the chance, if it isn’t too late yet.” Lan JingYi said it quietly enough that the only reason Lan SiZhui heard it was because he sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Lan JingYi. Lan XiChen nodded and Lan JingYi straightened.

“There’s definitely no coming back from the third stage.” Wei WuXian nodded. “Those would be the ones with cracks on their chests. If you touch them, you will also get infected by the resentful energy seeping out from them.” Lan SiZhui nodded in agreement.

“Based on this, those in the first stage should be cured in two weeks or a month.” Lan WangJi nodded.

“Those in the second stage should take longer.” Wei WuXian nodded. “Somewhere between three months and six months.”

“But they can be cured, you think?” Nie MingJue inquired.

“If our theories are right...” Wei WuXian made eye contact with Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi, waiting for both their nods. “They should be able to recover from this. I suggest we send them back to Gusu, where they can heal in the Cold Pond Cave, that is a naturally positive energy outcrop. They’d need cleansing and help with the transfer of spiritual energy.”

“I’ll arrange it.” Lan XiChen nodded.

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” Wei WuXian bowed his head.

“As for Jin ZiXuan’s suggestion that we stop our raids and chase Wen Xu, I am against it.” Nie MingJue said. “This way, we would easily loose ground. Not to mention, if Wen Xu just runs back to Qishan again, the whole war still needs to be fought in order to catch him. He can dance in and out of the city as he pleases.”

“What is Sect Leader Nie’s suggestion?” Jiang FengMian asked curiously.

“I will sneak into Nightless City alone to assassinate Wen RuoHan.” Nie MingJue said, bringing dead silence into the tent. After a moment, Lan XiChen stood, glaring at his friend.

“We were just talking about Wen Xu, how did you figure it would be best if you went for the head of the snake?” Jiang FengMian furrowed his brow, his tone chiding.

“Sect Leader Jiang, as commander in charge, how can I sit by and watch my people and soldiers getting slaughtered?” Nie MingJue frowned. “Wen Xu is too slippery to be caught, I

have tried to assassinate him in the past, in vain. It is the easiest solution to cut off the head of the snake, and with it, the body dies.”

“Sect Leader Nie, I cannot permit this.” Jiang FengMian said.

“Neither can I.” Lan XiChen said.

“Sect Leader Nie.” Suddenly, Jin Ling’s voice rang out in the room and everyone turned to look at him. He was frowning and looking at his table, his eyes jumping between spots only he could see before he looked up. “In the past, I assume you tried killing him subtly. You snuck into his tent at night, set a master archer in a hidden spot to shoot him and such?”

“Yes.” Nie MingJue frowned back.

“I have an idea then.” Jin Ling smirked and Lan XiChen sat down to listen to him as well.

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The plan was as follows: the raids would continue as usual. They split into two once more, Lan SiZhui’s group led by Jin ZiXuan and Lan XiChen once more, while Lan WangJi and Jiang Cheng would lead the other group. The absence of the two Sect Leaders was notable but not alarming. Jiang FengMian was from an older generation, so naturally, he would need to rest between battles, and Nie MingJue was in charge of most of the army, since the Nie Sect was the one most experienced in the art of war, this decision only made sense. As a commander in charge, he did not have the luxury to go on the battlefield at all times.

At least, this was what they intended to make Wen Xu believe.

Jin Ling’s plan wasn’t overly complicated. While the two groups battled, Nie MingJue and his two most trusted would sneak into the woods and approach the battlefield from the cover. He would search for Wen Xu nearby, and if he found him, he would kill him or capture him. If he did not, he would search until the battle was concluded, then return to the camp.

The only issue with Jin Ling’s plan was that if Nie MingJue got delayed or got caught, they would not be able to tell. Of course, Lan XiChen told Nie MingJue to send up a flare if he was in trouble, but from his character, Lan SiZhui doubted the other man would actually do so.

However, he kept his opinion to himself and also kept his focus on the battle instead. This time, Wei WuXian was with their group, which surprised Lan SiZhui, because he thought he’d want to fight by his brother’s or Lan WangJi’s side, but Wei WuXian’s answer to this was just a grin and shrug.

“Jiang Cheng also switched groups. Also, I’d feel bad about this group if it didn’t have a Jiang Sect disciple.”

“Un—Jiang WanYin switched groups because his father stayed behind.” Jin Ling huffed. “Nobody likes you here, why don’t you just go away?”

“Young Master Wei, don’t take it to heart, Jin Ling doesn’t like anyone other than his dog.” Lan JingYi said.

“You—!” Jin Ling glared at him.

“Doesn’t he like the two of you?” Wei WuXian pointed between Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui.

“JingYi is annoying, why would I like him?” Jin Ling pouted.

“Ah, you didn’t say anything about SiZhui!” Wei WuXian said victoriously.

“Don’t call him SiZhui, you’re not close! And of course, I didn’t say anything. He’s my cousin, does it matter if I like him or not?”

“Still so prickly.” Wei WuXian sighed. “You know, once you’ll have to make nice with people you don’t like, what will you do then? Will you be so short-tempered even then?”

“Nobody asked you!”

“Young Master Wei, does this wise advice also apply to you as well?” Jin ZiXuan asked, not even looking over at them, chin lifted as he rode beside Lan XiChen on his horse.

“What do you mean?” Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows. “Does Young Master Jin imply I am short-tempered?”

“Of course not.” Jin ZiXuan hummed.

“So arrogant...” Wei WuXian muttered under his breath.

“Young Masters, perhaps it is best if we do not alert the whole Wen Sect of our arrival?” Lan XiChen asked with the patience of a monk. At this, the three of them quieted and didn’t even have the opportunity to speak, because they arrived to the field where their next battle would be fought. “Remember to only kill puppets who have entered the third stage. Lan SiZhui and myself will subdue them once it is time, so you can capture the affected, but until then, try not to engage in combat.”

“Yes.” The men around them echoed and bowed. Seeing the opposing Wen forces, the armies were once again balanced. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with his friends and nodded each in turn. Jin ZiXuan gestured and with the beat of the drill drum, the battle began.

It was raining once more as they crossed swords with the Wen Sect, but still everyone kept an eye out towards the trees, to see if Nie MingJue’s signal flare would shot up. They battled for a while before the people began turning into puppets. Lan SiZhui kicked a Wen soldier away, and caught Lan XiChen’s eye across the field. They nodded to each other.

“JingYi, now!” Lan SiZhui called out, having no idea where Lan JingYi was. Lan JingYi didn’t take his time, appearing from the side moments later with blood-soaked sleeves and muddy robes.



“Go, I’ll look out!” He nodded. Lan SiZhui sheathed Yingjiu and leapt up, calling forth Hudie. If it wasn’t an expertly made guqin that survived the resentful energy of the Burial Mounds, Lan SiZhui would be worried that the spring rain would damage it. Thankfully, the only damage it caused was to make the notes pang out slightly distorted.

Him and Lan XiChen on the other side of the field played different, yet strikingly similar tunes. Lan SiZhui used his own, translated version of the old Qin language to play *Rest*, while Lan XiChen played the more refined version. They’ve tested this the previous two days when they had nothing to do while the troops prepared for the next battle. Both versions would work with different effects – while Lan SiZhui’s would paralyze and force them to stop their struggles, Lan XiChen’s song would soothe their consciousness, easing up the Yin Iron’s control from their minds.

The sounds of the guqin and the flute blended nicely together, and Lan SiZhui wondered if he’d ever hear Senior Wei and Hanguang-Jun play together. After a while, no more puppets were created and all Wen soldiers had been defeated. Lan SiZhui and Lan XiChen shared a look, then joined the others where they were surrounding the captured puppets.

“MingJue was either successful or scared Wen Xu away.” Lan XiChen said. “Let us go back to the camp and wait for him.”

Everyone agreed and they returned to the camp. Nobody else was there yet, so they arranged the puppets much like they had done with the previous ones. They just began to rest when Jiang Cheng and Lan WangJi’s group arrived along with Nie MingJue. The Nie Sect Leader had a huge grin on his face, and he was carrying something in a bag. It was smaller in size and round – Lan SiZhui wondered if it was liquor again.

“Friends!” Nie MingJue bellowed before he even arrived to the main tents, and everyone in hearing range turned their attention to him. “Let us celebrate tonight once again, for ridding this world from one more evil! The Jiang and Lan Sects had captured Wen ZhuLiu, the Core-Melting Hand and Wen Chao, Wen RuoHan’s son. They were Wen RuoHan’s right hand. Today, we drink to cutting off his left hand!” With this, he reached into the bag and pulled out...

“I’m going to be sick.” Lan JingYi said as he turned away, but nobody else really seemed bothered by the sight of Wen Xu’s severed head.

“Who ever said MingJue doesn’t have a flare for dramatics?” Lan XiChen sighed, shaking his head. Then, he stepped forward.

“MingJue, you were victorious then. Congratulations. Perhaps, we should give Wen Xu’s body the respect of not swinging his head around?” He smiled, though it looked more like a grimace to Lan SiZhui.

“Ah, XiChen, accompany me.” Nie MingJue smiled at Lan XiChen, who nodded at him, then the two of them walked off towards the sleeping quarters. As one of the horses they’ve taken was led by Lan SiZhui, he realized there was a body draped over it, suspiciously short with a head. At least then Nie MingJue didn’t just take the head; this also implied they’d give the corpse a proper burial.

Jiang Cheng came over to their little group and Lan WangJi joined him.

“Lan Zhan.” Wei WuXian smiled at the other man, who just inclined his head towards him. Then, Wei WuXian turned to Jiang Cheng. “How was it?”

“Wen Xu was hiding near us this time. He had quite a few people with him, so me and Second Young Master Lan went to help him out. Him and Sect Leader Nie had a fierce battle, but in the end, Wen Xu was defeated. Lan WangJi even killed the Dire Own he had. The puppets on the field we were on immediately turned back to human.”

“That’s good, that’s good.” Wei WuXian nodded, rubbing his chin. “I wonder why those who were with us didn’t also turn back?”

“Don’t overthink it, he probably had two owls or something.” Jiang Cheng said. Wei WuXian seemed to accept this answer and nodded.

“Come on, I was promised a drink tonight.” He told Jiang Cheng. “Let’s change into something less spoiled to celebrate!”

“Fine.” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, then turned to Lan WangJi and gave a shallow bow. Wei WuXian just smiled and waved at him before pulling Jiang Cheng after himself, towards the sleeping quarters.



That battle when Wen Xu had been defeated, while being a big victory, didn’t change the course of the war. They still had to fight their way through the Wen Sect’s territory.

War was, more or less, boring. Jin Ling often complained about this, but Lan SiZhui never really understood until they were in Wen jurisdiction and life became monotone. A day in battle, two to rest, another day battle. Killing wasn’t to his taste either, and he wished this would stop sooner rather than later, so Yingjiu wouldn’t have to be bloodied again.

Lan SiZhui also gained his own reputation, like Jin Ling had, it seemed.

It was the end of the spring, night air already heavy with heat. The three of them were heading back from training when they spotted Wei WuXian sitting amongst other Sects’ disciples, drinking. Lan SiZhui noted quite a few Lan disciples also had cups in front of them, but he didn’t say anything as Wei WuXian called them over.

“Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui, sit, you have to listen to this!” He grinned, patting the ground next to him. There weren’t seats prepared, so Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui had to sit on the bare ground. Lanterns lit up the low table they gathered around, and nobody was dressed heavily. Summer was upon them.

“Since you invited us here, won’t you also offer us liquor?” Jin Ling asked Wei WuXian with his nose turned up. Wei WuXian rolled his eyes and pushed a cup in front of Jin Ling. They raised their cups to each other, then Jin Ling quickly downed the drink, screwing his eyes shut. Afterwards, he shuddered and made a disgusted noise.

“It can’t be that bad.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“Would brother Lan also like to try?” Wei WuXian asked with a mischievous smirk. To Lan SiZhui’s surprise, Lan JingYi huffed and took a cup for himself.

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui chided him quietly, but all he received was a flat look.

“SiZhui. We’re already adults, why can’t we make the choice to drink or not? And it’s not like we haven’t tried before. You remember that night hunt at—” Before he could finish, Lan SiZhui quickly reached over and with both hands, covered Lan JingYi’s mouth. Next to them, Jin Ling and Wei WuXian shared a look.

“SiZhui, don’t tell me you’ve lied! You said you never drank before!” Wei WuXian told him.

“It was one cup—” Lan JingYi took advantage of Lan SiZhui relaxing to pull his hand away, but then Lan SiZhui pressed them even harder.

“You really drank?!” Jin Ling glared at Lan SiZhui, who was sure his whole body was flushed by now, not just his face.

“I tasted it, I wouldn’t say drink.” Lan SiZhui muttered. Lan JingYi pulled off his hands and Lan SiZhui let him.

“It really was just a cup, and it was like he drank water.” He said, then picked up the cup and threw it back. “Me on the other hand, discovered my limit is at three cups.”

“Which is why you shouldn’t drink.”

“Lan Zhan passes out after just one cup.” Wei WuXian shrugged. “Compared to him, Lan JingYi can hold his liquor.” He paused, then said: “Ah, but I didn’t call you over to drink! Lan SiZhui, I’ve heard the most interesting tale from these brothers. Would you also like to hear it?” He grinned, and Lan SiZhui had a feeling his answer should be no. Still, he nodded. “Song Su, repeat the story!” He gestured to a Nie Sect disciple.

“Ah, alright.” Song Su nodded, then drank a cup and cleared his throat. “They say there is a disciple from the Lan Sect, who is elegant and gentle. He is delicate but strong. He plays a dark guqin with the tassels white and red. When the strings sound up, spring rain comes down and washes away the evil of the Wen Sect.”

“How is that?” Wei WuXian laughed loudly, throwing back his head. Lan SiZhui felt his face heat. “Ah, it’s not over, it’s not over!” Wei WuXian gestured Song Su to continue.

“Ah, see brothers, this Lan disciple is himself the spring rain, bringing peace and chaos into the world at the same time. They don’t know who it is, but they call him ChunYu-Jun.”

“How’s that, Lan SiZhui?” Wei WuXian grinned at him. “Do you like it? I think it suits you!”

“SiZhui also has a title now?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Ah, brother Lan, brother Lan!” Wei WuXian stood on unsteady legs, then leaning on various shoulders, went over to sit by Lan JingYi’s side, throwing an arm around his shoulders. “Your time will come, you will see. But for now, let us all celebrate ChunYu-Jun’s title, huh?” He nudged Lan JingYi, who sighed but nodded looking over at Lan SiZhui.

“Well, at least my title will not be as idiotic as theirs.”

“No, yours will be worse! I promise!” Jin Ling told him loudly. “I’ll make sure of that!”

“Jin Ling, I’ve heard previously you’ve named your sword Xianzi and your bow Huangfeng. How could we doubt you come up with the best title to embarrass Lan JingYi?” Wei WuXian looked at him flatly, and Jin Ling glared back.

“Xianzi is a perfectly fine name. And I didn’t name my bow Huangfeng. Everyone decided this is what it will be called. What, Lan SiZhui also named his guqin Hudie and Lan JingYi named his sword Zhameng. Are those good names?”

“Ah, I’ve heard Lan SiZhui’s guqin is named for sentimental reasons, so I wouldn’t dare comment on it.” Wei WuXian said. “As for Zhameng...” He tilted his head, a small, thoughtful frown on his face. “Mn. I also think it fits the wielder well, don’t you?” He grinned and patted Lan JingYi’s shoulder. “Lan JingYi is like a grasshopper, able to completely blend in with the rest of his peers, but if you disturb his peace he will not stay placid anymore.” He nodded, satisfied with the answer. Lan JingYi grinned at him.

“It’s not that thoughtful, Wei WuXian.” Jin Ling told him. “JingYi was a child when he named the sword, and he probably couldn’t think of anything else.”

“Mn. I disagree.” Wei WuXian said, seemingly enjoying the debate. “When naming something important as your sword, everyone puts a lot of thought into it, don’t you think? It is, after all, something people will judge your character by. If you chose an unsuitable name, it will change people’s view on you.”

“What about your sword then? What about Suibian?”

“Ah, you see, this also says a lot about my character, especially if you listen to how it came to get this name.” Wei WuXian said. “As I said, people put a lot of thought into naming their swords. When there are just too many thoughts, you cannot help but say, ‘I don’t know, whatever!’”

“And you think people will judge you positively for that?” Jin Ling frowned.

“I think when people learn this, they will realize I am a free spirited and carefree person who is also considerate – sometimes too considerate. Would you say these are negative traits?”

“I would.” Jin Ling scoffed. “Since when is laziness and mindlessness viewed as good?”

“Ah, if you don’t know, then you haven’t experienced enough yet.” Wei WuXian told him, which was a bad idea. Jin Ling immediately jumped on his feet and glared at Wei WuXian.

“Ah, Jin Ling, Young Master Wei didn’t mean it that way.” Lan SiZhui tried to diffuse the tension. “Please don’t be mad.”

“Hmph, as it is expected from ChunYu-Jun, isn’t it?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, sitting back down.

“Ah, Jin Ling, everyone, please, there’s no need to use this name.” Lan SiZhui asked them. “Every Lan disciple with the proper training could’ve done the same I did, I don’t deserve praise for this.”

“Lan SiZhui, you don’t know how to take a compliment! These brothers worked hard to fabricate this tale and give you a mysterious background, can’t you be at least thankful?” Jin Ling sneered.

“You’re just happy that finally you’re not the only one of us who gained a strange reputation.” Lan JingYi said.

“Don’t be like that, JingYi.” Wei WuXian frowned. “MouShi truly grew into his title, didn’t he?”

“You—!” Jin Ling glared at Wei WuXian, who then broke into laughter, pushing a jar in front of him, the liquor sloshing out on the sides onto the table that was already covered in almond peels and alcohol. “Ch, at least my title makes sense.” Jin Ling said as he picked up the jar and poured himself another cup.

“ChunYu-Jun sounds divine and elegant.” One of the Lan disciples sitting with them said. He was older than Lan SiZhui, and he didn’t know him by name, but he’d definitely seen him around before. The Lan disciple smiled at Lan SiZhui. “It fits someone in ZeWu-Jun’s favor to have such a title.”

“Whatever.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “We’re in the middle of a war, not weaving poems.” He stood. “Lan SiZhui, isn’t it time for us to go?”

“Ah, yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded, also standing, minding the time. “It is almost curfew.”

“You’re going already? We’re not even in the Cloud Recesses!” Wei WuXian whined. Lan SiZhui smiled at him and bowed.

“Have a good night, everyone.”

“Good night, ChunYu-Jun!” They chorused with a wide grin and Lan SiZhui shook his head fondly before turning and leading the other two away before they decided they hadn’t had enough to drink.



Summer marked their one year having arrived to the past. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui sat in Jin Ling’s tent quietly enjoying a cup of tea together, but they didn’t really talk. During the year, so much had happened the only time Lan SiZhui really had opportunity to

miss his home was in the Burial Mounds, and he did not think fondly of his time spent there. He suspected the others also missed their home – the future.

“You know, even without the elders, I’d have made a fine Sect Leader.” Jin Ling said at once, slamming his cup on the table, then he stood and began walking around. “When Uncle was the Sect Leader, he often held his meetings in private, so I never really saw how he led the Sect. This is one of the reasons why I spent so much time in Lotus Pier. Uncle Jiang didn’t hide away to deal with his business, unless he thought it was not suitable for me.”

“You know, for once I agree with you.” Lan JingYi said as he held his head on his hand, elbow propped on the table. He played with the teacup like it was a toy. “You would’ve made an alright Sect Leader.”

“Hey!” Jin Ling glared and Lan JingYi smirked half-heartedly.

“I think...” Lan JingYi straightened up, pouring himself some more tea. “I think I don’t regret coming here.”

“What do you mean?” Lan SiZhui frowned at him, nudging his own cup forward. Lan JingYi poured him too.

“I mean, in the future, we’re compared to the previous generation. They say Hanguang-Jun’s generation was one of the greatest of the era, one of the strongest, but nobody ever considered why. I mean, Hanguang-Jun is only a year or so older than Jin Ling in this time! Jiang WanYin is also almost the same age as him! And they’re already participating in a war across all the lands, not just some small territory struggle. This is the real deal. How many cultivators can say they’ve participated in a war before they turned twenty?”

“A lot, actually.” Jin Ling inserted, but was ignored as Lan JingYi, though had not been asked, also refilled Jin Ling’s cup.

“All I’m saying is that by coming here, we’ve also experienced a lot. I know I’ve become a better cultivator. I’ve invented a talisman that doesn’t exist even in the future!”

“*We* invented.” Jin Ling corrected, sitting back down. “But I understand what you mean. Even though I don’t believe my father sees it that way, but when he corrects me if I don’t bow to a Sect Leader, it’s almost like...”

“Like having a father?” Lan JingYi teased and Jin Ling clicked his tongue at his friend. Moments later, he nodded.

“Even though he only sees me as a troublesome disciple who was forced to be his direct subordinate by Lan XiChen, being scolded by him doesn’t feel like when my Uncles scolded me.”

“At least you got to know your parents.” Lan JingYi nodded. “If we think about it this way, this trip into the past, it isn’t that bad after all.”

“Speak for yourself. Your parents are safely in Moling, because your mother is pregnant with *you*. My father is on the battlefield every other day and my mother is in Lotus Pier with *Madam Yu*.”

“SiZhui’s fathers are also here, doesn’t he also have the right to whine then?” Lan JingYi taunted and Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui hid a chuckle in his sleeve.

“Alright, alright. This isn’t a competition.” Lan SiZhui placated, patting their hands. “Why don’t we stop thinking about the past and think about the future instead?”

“You mean... We should think of our future or this time’s future?” Lan JingYi frowned. “Is the past the present or the events before now?”

“Lan JingYi.” Jin Ling scoffed at him.

“Huh?”

“You make my head hurt. Drink your tea and shut up.”

“Ah, Young Mistress, remember, in this time you’re not yet Sect Leader! Or not anymore?” Lan JingYi laughed, and as Jin Ling leapt forward to catch him, he stood and ran away. Jin Ling followed him, and eventually, the two of them began to run around the tent, chasing each other, laughing and shouting.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

Two weeks later, they’ve finally arrived to Qishan.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Lan SiZhui's title: 春雨(君) ChūnYǔ(-Jūn): "spring rain/gift from above"

## Wrath I.

“We’ve finally arrived!” Nie MingJue’s voice boomed through the camp. In the neat rows, every single disciple who had joined the war and survived so far and was mostly uninjured was there, the fronts meeting in front of Qishan. The smaller army Lan SiZhui got used to in the past three months had once again grew three times its size. “We stand in front of Qishan, in the heart of the Wen Sect. You have suffered a lot, I know.” He paused, exchanging a look with Lan XiChen and Jiang FengMian. “But now it is our time to repay Wen RuoHan what he’d done against the people. In seven days, we will storm into Nightless City and end the Wen Sect’s oppression.”

Cheers rang out and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with Lan JingYi. Once everyone quieted down, Nie MingJue continued.

“So far we’ve only tasted Wen RuoHan’s Yin Iron’s power. Now that we’re here, we will once again, have to fight a desperate battle, sometimes against our own fallen people. We have to steel our hearts and not think of puppets as our brothers in arms, but instead as Wen RuoHan’s tools. Luck is not in our favor, but if we fight hard enough, I have no doubt in my heart we will be able to defeat the evil. We will fight for what’s right and we will fight for our people. I am asking you once again to work together and be brave. Victory is close, and it will be ours!”

Once again, cheers rang out.



“So, what’s the plan?” Jin Ling asked that night as they were having tea in his tent once again. Lan SiZhui sighed, lowering his cup. He’d been thinking about this since they’ve arrived near Qishan and so far, the only solution he could think of was this:

“We will go with the others. Once we’re in Nightless City, I will use resentful energy to help the four Sects with Wen RuoHan’s undead army. The only time I’ve battled against the Yin Iron had been at the border, and there only a fraction of the Yin Iron’s power was present, so it was easy to counter the attack. I am not sure how successful I will be against Wen RuoHan.”

“Shouldn’t you focus on Wen RuoHan only?” Jin Ling asked with a frown. “Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun will be there to help with the puppets, but you’re the only one who has even a fraction of a chance to counter the Yin Iron’s power.”

“That’s true.” Lan JingYi nodded. “As much as I dislike your use of resentful energy, it is best to keep your strength for this fight only. If you exhaust yourself with Wen RuoHan’s army, you will sure not have a chance against the man himself.”

“Perhaps.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “But Wen RuoHan won’t be present. Remember, last time if I remember correctly, Wei WuXian countered the Yin Iron’s effect, that is why Wen RuoHan



left his palace. Since I'm not in possession of any Yin Iron shard, countering the effect will be difficult."

"Well, we knew this won't be easy without the YiLing Patriarch." Jin Ling sighed.

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, also getting lost in thought. "JingYi, you said Jin GuangYao is still in Nightless City, right?" He turned to his friend, who gave him a wide-eyed look and nodded. "Before, my plan had been to use this connection to the inside of Scorching Sun Palace to somehow end the war. Do you think Jin GuangYao could sneak us inside without being noticed?"

Lan JingYi frowned and shook his head. "Mainly Lan XiChen communicates with him. I do not know much about their own plans, perhaps they don't even have any."

"What would you do once you're inside the Palace?" Jin Ling asked. "Assassinate Wen RuoHan?"

"I wouldn't be able to get close enough." Lan SiZhui shook his head. "I just thought maybe if I get close enough, I might be able to take control over the Yin Iron."

"Take control over it?" Lan JingYi glared at him. "Surely, you don't mean that."

"I don't know." Lan SiZhui sighed, frustrated. "The biggest problem is that my demonic cultivation had not been tested against the Yin Iron's energy yet. I have no idea how it will react."

"SiZhui, you broke out from the Burial Mounds all by yourself with barely a scratch on you." Jin Ling told him, his voice sounding accusing. Lan SiZhui didn't know what to make of it.

"That's true." Lan JingYi agreed. "The Yin Iron was originally kept in the Burial Mounds, and in the whole world nobody knows a place with more resentful energy built up than there. SiZhui, if you got out from there so easily, then surely, the Yin Iron can't cause problems?" He smiled, looking hopeful and cheerful. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked away.

"This is different. The Burial Mounds have no intent other than killing the living. It is a broad enough will that it is the nature of resentful energy. But the Yin Iron is so powerful because it can command all this killing intent onto one specific target and bear down three times the Burial Mounds' resentment onto the world." He saw his friend didn't get it, so he suppressed an annoyed sigh and explained: "Imagine a blank canvas. You can paint anything you want onto it and it will be your creation. However, if there is already a shape drawn onto the canvas, then no matter what you paint on it, that creation isn't entirely yours."

"Then paint over it." Jin Ling said with a carefully blank look.

"Ah, but no matter how many layers you paint on top of it, the shape will still show underneath."

“But isn’t that enough?” Lan JingYi asked. “You don’t need to take full control. You just need to stop Wen RuoHan from controlling it. Wouldn’t that be enough for one of us to sneak up behind him and stab him?”

“If we go into the Palace, how many guards will be there?” Jin Ling frowned, shaking his head. “We would be too busy to fight them off.”

“Last time, your Uncle stabbed him, while maintaining his cover the whole time.” Lan JingYi mentioned. “How about that?”

“I don’t want to work with him.” Jin Ling glared at him.

“No offense, but nobody cares.” Lan JingYi said. “It’s either work with him or lose.”

“I don’t like it.” Jin Ling shook his head. “He was ready to cut my throat in Guanyin temple. What guarantees that this time he won’t betray us?”

“In Guanyin temple he was cornered and desperate.” Lan JingYi explained. “This time he’s not even aware of half the things he was then. He’s ambitious and wants to get into his father’s favors, so he will do as we ask him.”

“I don’t trust him.”

“I know, but we don’t have a choice.” Lan JingYi shook his head and Lan SiZhui sighed. This was their best plan so far, the most effective at least.

“Let us talk to ZeWu-Jun and contact Jin GuangYao.” Lan SiZhui said, standing. Jin Ling still looked like he’d rather keep arguing and cancel the whole plan. Two years ago, more so, maybe even a year ago, he might have. Now, he just put on a sour face and followed them out of the tent.

It was late, though not yet curfew. As they asked around, the soldiers around camp revealed Lan XiChen was in the main tent with Nie MingJue, so that’s where they were headed. Once there, the guard standing by nodded to them, but didn’t stop them from entering. Still, before they went inside, Lan JingYi called out:

“Sect Leader Lan, this is Lan JingYi. May we speak?” There was a pause, then Lan SiZhui sensed a spell being broken, so there was probably a silencing spell over the tent before. Lan XiChen called out to enter and they did, bowing to the Sect Leaders.

“Boys, what are you doing here so late?” Nie MingJue asked from where he was standing in front of a table, his back to it. Lan XiChen stood close to him, an inquiring expression on his face as well.

“We hoped to talk to Sect Leader Lan.” Lan JingYi said, peering at Lan XiChen.

“Can’t this wait?” Lan XiChen asked, somewhat stifled. They probably disturbed a conversation, so Lan SiZhui stepped forward and bowed.

“Excuse us for the interruption. If Sect Leader Lan wishes, these disciples can wait.”

“Let us talk tomorrow morning then.” Lan XiChen nodded, but Jin Ling stepped forward as well.

“It is actually somewhat urgent. It would be best if we could talk as soon as possible. We’ll wait outside.” He nodded, then turned to march out. Before he could, Lan XiChen sighed and stopped them.

“Wait.” The boys turned to look at him, but he turned to Nie MingJue. “MingJue, these boys often come up with plans that involve scheming. I ask you again to wait with your plans. I’ll talk to them, see what they figured out and we’ll return to yours then.”

“XiChen, you know as well as I that the only way to get close to Wen RuoHan is this way.” Nie MingJue said quietly. “Think it through, but with or without your approval, I will do this.” Lan XiChen pressed his lips together and repressed a sigh.

“Go, have some dinner. Once you’re back, we can talk more.”

“I’ll bring some back.” Nie MingJue nodded, then stormed out of the tent. Lan XiChen took a deep breath, then cast a silencing charm and gestured around the room.

“Let us sit.” He said, then went over to the head of the room, where usually Nie MingJue sat. The boys took their places at the other tables, for once not having to cram behind one to fit into the room with the other Sect Leaders. “I suspect, much like MingJue, you also have a reckless plan to stop Wen RuoHan?” Lan XiChen asked, and Lan SiZhui was surprised to hear some annoyance in his tone.

“Yes.” Lan JingYi began, leaning forward. “Last time things were very different. We’re afraid the same course of events cannot be repeated anymore.”

“You’ve changed so much?” Lan XiChen raised surprised eyebrows. “I thought you said even though you’ve meddled with people’s fate, everything’s stayed mostly the same.”

“Ah, that was...” Lan JingYi stuttered. “That was before I learned what Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling had been doing since we’ve been separated. Apparently, they’ve changed the timeline quite a lot.”

“Should I be worried?” Lan XiChen furrowed his brows. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“ZeWu-Jun, the truth is, we do not know ourselves how these changes will affect this time. However, some things that had happened in the past had been avoided this time around, and because of that, while previously the four Sects’ victory was granted, now we’re not sure how to bring them to victory.” He admitted.

“Well, we did come up with a plan.” Lan JingYi noted, eyes wide and earnest.

“As bad as it is.” Jin Ling nodded.

“I see.” Lan XiChen nodded, sounding defeated. “So, what is it?”

“We would need Meng Yao’s help in sneaking into the Scorching Sun Palace.” Lan JingYi said. “Once we’re inside, we would distract Wen RuoHan and either one of us or Meng Yao would stab Wen RuoHan.”

For a long time, Lan XiChen was silent, looking down, head bowed so they couldn’t see his expression clearly. Then, he heaved the biggest sigh Lan SiZhui had heard from him and stood, walking forward, so eventually his back was to them.

“This isn’t a good plan if Nie MingJue says it. This also isn’t a good plan if you say it. Boys. Perhaps unknowingly, but you had the same plan as me and Sect Leader Nie had been arguing about. He also wants to sneak in and assassinate Wen RuoHan.” The three of them shared a look and Lan SiZhui tried to remember if he ever read about this in the history books, but he couldn’t recall. “Is there no other way it could be done?” Lan XiChen turned around to look at them after a pause.

“Unless SiZhui can test his cultivation on the Yin Iron infested puppets directly, no.” Lan JingYi said. “If we don’t know if he can successfully subdue them, joining the fight in Nightless City is pointless for us. Wen RuoHan will hide in his palace and send his undead army to kill us all and nobody can do anything about it.”

“Why don’t you use the puppets we’ve captured?” Lan XiChen furrowed his brows.

“They’re not infected by the Yin Iron directly.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “It would be best if we got a puppet from Nightless City and I could test my cultivation on him, but for that, we’d need to go into Nightless City. Once we’re there, we will be trapped, and that scenario would turn out best for the final battle, not a practice run.”

“Why do you say we will be trapped in Nightless City?” Lan XiChen frowned and Lan SiZhui felt his face heat.

“Ah, I remember this from the history books.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Wen RuoHan’s undead army was too vast to fight, and eventually the four Sects were cornered into the Nightless City. If it wasn’t for the YiLing Patriarch’s demonic cultivation, the four Sects’ army would’ve died in Nightless City, massacred by the puppets.”

“I haven’t heard of this ‘YiLing Patriarch’ before. Is he one of ours?” Lan XiChen tilted his head to the side and the three of them exchanged a look.

“There’s no point telling you, since the YiLing Patriarch doesn’t exist anymore and won’t in the future either.” Jin Ling said. “This is the thing we’ve changed about the future why the four Sects might lose the war. Without the Stygian Tiger Amulet, our chances are slim.” He paused, then grimaced, disgusted. “Of course, the great ChunYu-Jun had tried to warn us of this, but us, lowly mortals didn’t listen to his warnings.” He said in a raised voice. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together at the jab.

“There’s no point regretting the past now.” Lan SiZhui told Jin Ling. “As I said back then, I also didn’t want him to have this fate again. I am glad it was me who ended up in the Burial Mounds and not him. Instead of holding onto grudges, why don’t we think of the future?”

“See what you did?” Lan JingYi drawled. “MouShi, you made Lan SiZhui mad.”

“I’m not mad.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I just want to concentrate on things we can do instead of things we cannot go back to redo.”

“Alright.” Lan XiChen placated gently. “There’s no need to fight.” He paused and sighed. “Perhaps we could send out a group in the meantime to capture one of Wen RuoHan’s puppets near Nightless City. It can’t be that the moment some of us shows up they’re going to corner us. If we take it back here, you can safely experiment.”

“I guess we could do that.” Lan JingYi blinked, surprised. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui also nodded, glad to hear they had more options.

“And what if it turns out Lan SiZhui can’t control the puppets?” Jin Ling asked.

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Then, I’ll send a letter to Meng Yao tonight. It doesn’t hurt if we have more plans than just one.” At this, the three of them also nodded. The timing was excellent because moments later the flap of the tent opened and Nie MingJue walked in with a tray in his hand. He wordlessly put it on one of the tables, then turned to Lan XiChen.

“So, what have you concluded?”

“MingJue, I need you to assemble a small group to go to Nightless City tomorrow.”

“Why can’t we go?” Jin Ling asked. “We know what we need and we have the most chance of getting out of the situation if it gets out of hand.”

“You’re also in possession of knowledge that cannot fall into Wen RuoHan’s hands at any costs.” Lan XiChen told them. “We cannot risk you getting caught.”

“Wen RuoHan doesn’t care about us. He doesn’t even know us. Why would he think to capture us?” Jin Ling cocked an eyebrow.

“Still.” Lan XiChen shook his head.

“Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng.” Nie MingJue said and the four of them turned to look at him. “They have gone on secret missions in the past.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded, seemingly thinking about it. “When we were still near Yunmeng, they’ve gone to the Wen settlement that held us up. If you still remember, we’ve been stuck there for a while.” He told the three boys, who nodded. “At one point, Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng volunteered to go ahead, just the two of them and get rid of this blockage. By the time the rest of us have arrived to the settlement, the Wen soldiers were dead.”

“All of them?” Jin Ling frowned, looking over at Lan SiZhui, still, he asked Lan XiChen: “How did they die?”

“I never paid much attention.” Lan XiChen admitted. “Ah, if I remember correctly, Wei WuXian used some kind of talisman to draw resentful energy to them and many bled from

seven orifices. Others had been slaughtered by sword.”

“Resentful energy?” Jin Ling’s eyebrow twitched, still not looking away from Lan SiZhui.

“It’s probably not how you think.” Lan SiZhui tried to reassure. “Young Master Wei had always been a master of talismans. Remember where the Evil Lure flag comes from. It is not beyond imagination that he’d invented it and used it even without being who he was in the past.” Jin Ling’s jaw clenched and he didn’t say anything for a long time before he huffed and looked away.

“I hope you’re right.”

“Is there something wrong with the talismans?” Lan XiChen asked, his forehead wrinkling. “After this mission, Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng began to fight. I think they still hadn’t made up, but I don’t know what it is about.”

“Oh?” Jin Ling perked up again.

“Young Mistress, they fight all the time. You’ve experienced yourself as well.” Lan JingYi told him. “Why do you always have to think of the worst? There’s no YiLing Patriarch now. It’s just a few talismans and a fight. Don’t overthink it.”

“I’m not.” Jin Ling frowned. “But what would you think of if you heard those things with the background I have?”

“Jin Ling, JingYi.” Lan SiZhui warned them, then when they looked over, he inclined his head towards Nie MingJue, who was watching them with a confused frown.

“Right.” Lan XiChen cleared his throat, a tight smile on his lips. “If you also agree, I think Young Master Wei and Young Master Jiang would do well on this mission. Maybe even WangJi could join them.”

“You don’t want us to go because where we are from, but you send your own brother and two Young Masters.” Jin Ling scowled.

“This is a task for talented cultivators. Young Masters Jiang and Wei and my brother are all powerful cultivators who also think quick on their feet and are efficient without taking their time.” Lan XiChen said. “They have also worked together in the past, so they know each other’s moves well enough to make an effective team.”

“Fine, so be it.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Lan XiChen nodded to him with a smile, then turned to Nie MingJue.

“This way, you won’t need to sneak inside.”

“XiChen.” Nie MingJue sighed, then turned to the three boys. “Boys, if your business with Sect Leader Lan is finished, please return to your quarters and rest. We all count on you during the battle of Nightless City, so please, preserve your strengths.”

The three of them stood at that, then bowed to the two Sect Leaders. “Yes, Sect Leader Nie. Good night.” With this, they headed out of the tent, Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen watching them go.

“What do you think?” Lan JingYi asked once they were out of earshot. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“It is a good plan. I’m just not sure if it’s going to work.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I agree.”

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The next day, Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were called to the main tents. There stood Lan XiChen with Nie MingJue and Jiang FengMian as well as Lan WangJi, Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian facing them. As soon as Jin Ling and the Lan arrived, Wei WuXian turned to them, surprised.

“Ah, SiZhui, are you also coming to this mission?”

“We’re not going.” Jin Ling told him as he pointedly joined the Sect Leaders across Wei WuXian, slightly behind Lan XiChen’s shoulder. Lan SiZhui smiled at Wei WuXian, then turned to the Sect Leaders and bowed before joining Jin Ling with Lan JingYi.

“What’s going on?” Jiang Cheng frowned.

“Young Master Jiang, Young Master Wei, WangJi. The mission I have for you today is for Lan SiZhui, that’s why I called him here today. He will be able to explain to you the best what he needs.” Lan XiChen turned to Lan SiZhui, who nodded and stepped forward, bowing to the other three.

“Young Masters, I need a puppet directly controlled by Wen RuoHan’s Yin Iron. Unlike the ones we’ve encountered at the borders, these ones are deeply infected with resentful energy, so it isn’t only more difficult to cure them, if even possible, but their will is also stronger. The best would be one that had been under the influence the longest, where the Yin Iron’s control is absolute. I realize it is not an easy task to capture one, and because of this, if you cannot get one, just return uninjured.”

“Our time is limited.” Lan XiChen added as he stepped forward, putting his hand on Lan SiZhui’s shoulder. “I trust that if someone can make this possible in two days, it is the three of you.”

“But Sect Leader Lan, aren’t we going to storm Nightless City in a few days anyways?” Jiang Cheng’s brows furrowed. “What’s the point?”

“SiZhui?” From Lan XiChen’s tone Lan SiZhui suspected he wanted him to decide if he wanted to share the details or not. Seeing that save Nie MingJue and Jiang FengMian, everyone present knew about his demonic cultivation, he decided to share.

“I would like to test if demonic cultivation can subdue the puppets Wen RuoHan is controlling, or possibly even turn them against him.”

“Lan SiZhui.” Lan WangJi looked up, brows furrowing in anger. Lan SiZhui looked down, feeling embarrassed. He had told Lan WangJi, after all, that he would give up demonic cultivation.

“Demonic cultivation?” Nie MingJue asked, tilting his head, confused.

“Like when we were in YiLing and you made those corpses hold Wen Chao?” Jiang Cheng frowned.

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded shyly. Jiang Cheng unexpectedly turned to Wei WuXian and glared at him, but Wei WuXian frowned back at him.

“Jiang Cheng, don’t look at me like that. Let’s focus on the task instead, okay?”

“For now.” Jiang Cheng bit out tersely. As Lan SiZhui glanced back to exchange a look with Lan JingYi, he noticed Jin Ling watching his uncle with narrowed eyes and wondered what was going on inside his head.

“This might be our only way to counter Wen RuoHan’s attacks. I’m not more pleased than you are to having to use this method, but I simply cannot think of a better way.” Lan XiChen said. “We’ve all met Wen RuoHan’s puppets, and those were born from only a fraction of the Yin Iron’s power.”

They were all quiet after this for a time, then Jiang Cheng sighed and nodded.

“If that’s the only way, fine. We’ll bring a puppet to ChunYu-Jun.”

“Ah, SiZhui, how is it that I’ve tried for years to get people to call Jin Ling Young Mistress and it doesn’t stick, but you’re called ChunYu-Jun for a few weeks and everyone already uses it to address you?” Lan JingYi complained.

“I’m the Sect—” Jin Ling began, then bit off the rest of the word, turning to Lan JingYi with a cold look. “Knowing who my father and Uncle is, do you have a death wish? Of course, people won’t call me that.”

“Jin Ling, will you ever share with us who is your father and uncle?” Wei WuXian wondered out loud. “You always talk about them like they’re well-known people, but you’ve never actually said their names.”

“A-Xian, don’t be noisy.” Jiang FengMian chided, speaking for the first time since they’ve arrived.

“Uncle Jiang, I’m just curious.”

“Well, don’t be. It’s none of your business.” Jiang Cheng said, tugging Wei WuXian slightly back by his arm. Wei WuXian pouted, but stepped back, leaving the topic at that.

“WangJi.” Lan XiChen turned to his brother in the following pause. “Will you go?”

“Brother, the rules are clear.” Lan WangJi said. “Is this wise?”



“Second Young Master Lan, I know the risks I’m taking and I’m willing to bear the consequences, whatever they may be. It is more important that we get through this with as few losses as possible, and this is the most efficient way.” He told Lan WangJi, hoping he understood the implications. If he was kicked out from the Lan Sect or punished severely for it, he would not complain.

His luck lay in that in this time, demonic cultivation was not as severely judged as in his time and he knew from history that Wei WuXian’s methods were not cursed during the Sunshot Campaign, as long as he used it to defeat Wen RuoHan. If the Sects were as desperate for a solution now as they were in Wei WuXian’s time, Lan SiZhui was confident that he wouldn’t be severely judged. And if he was, he would take the punishment. He wouldn’t be as arrogant as to think he was excused just because this aided them.

The other watched him for a long time, but in the end, lowered his eyes, which meant reluctantly, but he would do it. “I am most grateful to Second Young Master Lan.” Lan SiZhui told him and bowed low.

“Then, if you all agree, depart by midday.” Lan XiChen said. “Unfortunately, we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” The three of them echoed, bowing to Lan XiChen, then they left, Wei WuXian throwing an arm over Jiang Cheng’s shoulders as they headed back towards their rooms.

“Lan Zhan, we’ll meet you at the gates in an hour!” He called over and Lan WangJi inclined his head before turning and going towards his own tent.

The three of them watched them go, but before Lan SiZhui could excuse themselves to return to his own duties, Jiang FengMian turned to him.

“Lan SiZhui. Your cause is most noble, but I agree with Second Young Master Lan. The risks are too great to take. Sect Leader Lan,” he turned to Lan XiChen, “I do not wish to overstep, but do you truly believe this is the only way we could archive victory?” Lan XiChen looked back at him grimly, walking forward a little, so his face was partially turned away from them.

“Sect Leader Jiang, there are forces in this world we cannot counter. Several years ago, the Sects faced an enemy who had controlled some of these forces. I do not need to tell you, for you also know that the YiLing Burial Mounds were not always this desolate. The several battles fought against Xue ChongHai had made it so. From history we know it took at least four battles to finally gain victory for the Sects back then, and they’ve lost thousands of soldiers in this meantime, creating the YiLing Burial Mounds.

“We study history to learn from it. From this I’ve learned that sometimes righteous methods are not enough to fight evil. Sometimes we have to take desperate steps to preserve ourselves and grant our own survival. Imagine the pain you felt when Lotus Pier felt and apply it here. Your sons might die in this battle, so would my brother and several people we care deeply for.

“As Sect Leaders, isn’t it our responsibility to make sure our people survive? Should we not use all tools we have at our disposal to make sure they survive? How far should we be willing to go to save the people we deeply care about?” He sighed, turning back. “These are all questions I’ve asked myself since the Wen marched into to Cloud Recesses. When I think of those who died that day on the mountain, I find myself answering these questions with more confidence than I’d have even a year ago.”

“Sometimes the only cure for poison is poison.” Nie MingJue said equally as grim.

“Sect Leader Lan, your words are wise, however, you’re still young.” Jiang FengMian sighed. “The things we do in the heat of the moment affect the rest of our lives. If you take this step, you cannot turn back. Once you associate with demonic cultivation, you will always be judged by that. This might seem like a small price to pay right now, but think about the future.”

“That is exactly what I’m thinking about.” Lan XiChen nodded, looking towards the three boys standing on the side. Lan JingYi blinked back at him and Jin Ling’s head was bowed, so his expression was hidden. “The future might hold much joy, but only if we’re able to guarantee there is one.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui who looked down, thinking about Guanyin temple. The future also held horrible things.

“Sect Leader Lan, I understand your desperation.” Jiang FengMian nodded. “I just worry you do not understand the cost you’re willing to pay for this.”

“Even if I have to pay with my life, it will be worth it.” Lan XiChen nodded.

“Yes.” Jiang FengMian nodded. “However, as you said, we’re Sect Leaders. All of our decisions affect the Sect we lead. You may be willing to give your life, but are you willing to sacrifice your Sect for this?”

“Sect Leader Jiang, aren’t the crimes we commit in war for the greater good?” Nie MingJue asked then. “Who can judge the soldier who killed another to save his own life?”

“Sect Leader Nie, soldiers fight with swords, but there are only so many demonic cultivators in this world. Especially in times like this, who wants to associate with the methods Wen RuoHan is using? The people see Wen RuoHan as a demonic cultivator who turned evil and killed hundreds, thousands. What will they see if they encounter another demonic cultivator?”

“Sect Leader Jiang is right.” Lan XiChen nodded, his words sounding final. “I might not understand the price I’m paying for this. However, I also do not see another way out of this, other than risking our lives and passing down war to the next people who will be oppressed by Wen RuoHan. If the choice is either going down this path half-blindly or following the righteous path fully knowing our efforts were in vain, I’m willing to take this risk.”

Jiang FengMian was silent for a long time. In the end, he nodded. “If Sect Leader Lan is so set on his decision, I am no one to tell you otherwise. All I can do is, as your elder, warn you of the mistakes you’re about to make. If you still make them, I will still hear you out when the world turns against you.” With this, he nodded, bowed and walked away without another

word. Lan XiChen looked after him for a long time, then exhaled, his shoulders dropping, indicating how much tension they had been holding.

“XiChen.” Nie MingJue said, and Lan XiChen turned to him. “While the righteous path is the right one to take, you’re willing to sacrifice a lot to save us all. One does not make a decision as such lightly. For that, I respect you.” He paused. “I might also disapprove of demonic cultivation, but I am also a caring man. If this means our people will survive, I will support you.”

“Thank you.” Lan XiChen smiled at him tightly and Nie MingJue patted his shoulder with a nod, then turned and walked away. Lan XiChen stayed still for a long moment, then turned to the boys and smiled at them, though it was taunt. “It’s best if you return to your training. WangJi and the others won’t be back today I fear.”

“Yes, Sect Leader Lan.” They echoed, bowing, then left, though Lan SiZhui looked back once they reached the practice field and saw Lan XiChen still standing in the same spot, looking out over the camp, brows furrowed.



Wei WuXian, Jiang Cheng and Lan WangJi returned late at night. Lan SiZhui was immediately woken by servants. As he walked out of his tent he shared with Lan JingYi, he saw the camp was in general more awake than usual. Lan SiZhui wondered if it was only because of the return of the three Young Masters, but he didn’t have time to wonder as he was led towards one of the practice fields closer to the entrance. As they arrived, they saw a puppet, bound by rope and also by spiritual energy as well as chains. Lan SiZhui could guess the origin of the rope and the spiritual energy, but he wondered where the chain had come from.

“Young Master Wei, Young Master Jiang, Second Young Master Lan.” Lan SiZhui quickly bowed to them. “Are you alright?”

“Of course!” Wei WuXian grinned. “Catching one of them was not a problem at all. Making sure they didn’t follow us more so. We’ve been waiting a few miles away for hours before we concluded if they were coming, they would be here by now.” He yawned then, stretching. “Let me tell you, sitting in a tree and looking out for puppets is incredibly boring, especially with comrades like Lan Zhan and Jiang Cheng!”

“What’s going on here?” Jiang Cheng asked next, looking around. “Did something happen?”

“Sect Leader Lan is missing.” Came Jin ZiXuan’s voice from behind Lan SiZhui and he turned, bowing to the other, who acknowledged it with a nod.

“ZeWu-Jun is missing?” Wei WuXian frowned, looking towards Lan WangJi, whose only visible reaction was the tightening of his fist and clenching of his jaw.

“When did this happen?” He asked tersely.

“Just now as we wanted to let him know you’ve returned, the servants can’t find him.” Jin ZiXuan answered.

“Maybe he’s just somewhere else.” Wei WuXian said. “It doesn’t mean he’s... gone, right?”

“That is quite correct, Young Master Wei.” Came Lan XiChen’s voice from towards the gates and everyone turned to look, bowing to him. He was fully dressed, with his sword in his hand. He walked with confident strides and his robes flowed behind him.

“Sect Leader!”

“ZeWu-Jun!” Various voices cried as Lan XiChen stepped next to his brother, nodding to him in acknowledgement.

“I apologize for causing so much worry.” He told mainly to the people around them. “I couldn’t sleep, so I figured I could take a look around, make sure WangJi had returned. Who knew while I was outside, we’ve missed each other.”

Lan WangJi’s brows furrowed for the same reason Lan SiZhui frowned. It was not often that he heard or seen Lan XiChen lie, mainly because he had no need to, and he rather skirted around the truth than outright lie at all times. For him to say something untrue was not only rare, but unreasonable as well. Others wouldn’t doubt his words, but Lan XiChen had a tell. When he lied, he picked Liebing with his thumbnail. He did that now and Lan SiZhui wondered why, but he didn’t say anything, nor did Lan WangJi.

“Ah, that’s good then.” Wei WuXian sighed. “ZeWu-Jun, you went missing after the battle at Cloud Recesses for almost half a year, causing everyone to worry. Please, don’t do it again.” While he said this, he had a little, worried furrow between his brows and his tone was gentle and kind. Lan XiChen, instead of being offended by the words, smiled back at him in clear amusement.

“I apologize for worrying you, Young Master Wei. I’ll try to make sure not to go out without letting someone know in the future.” At this, the two of them shared a smile and a nod, both their expressions suggesting they were both joking but somewhat serious at the same time. Before the moment could stretch, Jiang Cheng tugged at Wei WuXian’s sleeve, a subtle warning to behave. Then, everyone turned to the puppet. “You’ve succeeded.” Lan XiChen observed.

“Brother.” Lan WangJi turned to him with a little bow. “I suggest we keep the puppet outside.”

“Yes.” Wei WuXian agreed. “Wen RuoHan’s hold is strong on this one and its resentful energy is greater than the ones we’ve brought back so far. It might be safer to keep it away from the wandering crowd.”

“Yes.” Lan XiChen said, his face turning serious. “We’ve already prepared an area in the back.” He gestured two Lan disciples over, who bowed, then took hold of the ropes and chains holding the puppet and started tugging it towards the gates. “SiZhui, you can start

your experiments tomorrow.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “For now, let us all go back to sleep. You’ve worked hard, Young Masters, WangJi. Thank you for the trouble.”

“Not a problem.” Jiang Cheng bowed, then tugged Wei WuXian after himself as they left. Lan XiChen then turned to Lan WangJi.

“WangJi, I have something to talk to some people about. Why don’t you also go back to rest.” Lan WangJi hesitated, and Lan SiZhui had a feeling he also wanted to talk to his brother, but as always, he didn’t push.

“Mn.” Lan WangJi bowed to his brother, then walked after the other two. Lan SiZhui prepared to bow and say goodnight as well, but Lan XiChen stopped him.

“SiZhui, if it isn’t too much trouble, don’t go yet. Please, collect Lan JingYi and Jin Ling, I have news to share.” Lan SiZhui blinked at him, but at the other’s look, he nodded and hurried off.

Lan JingYi was easy to wake, for he was already half-up. He also woke when Lan SiZhui was alerted of the commotion outside, but didn’t follow Lan SiZhui, because he assumed any news would be shared with him. Jin Ling was harder to wake. For all he was a light sleeper, he was stubborn, and when Lan SiZhui began telling him the Young Masters and Lan WangJi were back, he just waved a hand and told them to get lost, they’ll talk about it in the morning. Only then did he move when Lan SiZhui told him Lan XiChen wants to talk to them.

“In the middle of the night, is he insane?” Jin Ling grumbled as they headed towards the main tents.

“He went missing earlier. When Second Young Master Lan, Wei WuXian and Young Master Jiang arrived, the servants wanted to wake him, but they couldn’t find him. Minutes later he showed up coming in from the outside, saying he was out on a stroll. He...” Lan SiZhui bit his lip, unsure if he should reveal Lan XiChen had lied.

“He was out to meet Meng Yao, wasn’t he?” Lan JingYi asked, repressing a yawn. Lan SiZhui blinked at him. “Wasn’t he?” Lan JingYi blinked back.

“Ah, I suppose that makes more sense. He lied and said he was out on a stroll to wait for Second Young Master Lan.”

“Like Lan XiChen could lie.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“He is actually good at it.” Lan JingYi told him. “He only has a slight tell, but if you don’t know him very well, you won’t notice.”

“What is it?” Jin Ling asked.

“You think I’m going to tell you?” Lan JingYi grinned and Jin Ling glared at him. Thankfully, they were at the tent by then, and after getting permission to enter, they did.

Lan XiChen was alone, waiting for them, standing in front of a table, holding a cup of tea absently. He had a scroll laid out in front of him.

“Sect Leader Lan.” The three of them bowed to him, but Lan XiChen barely looked over before waving them over.

“Boys. I’ve met Meng Yao earlier.” He confirmed Lan JingYi’s theory. “He gave me this.” He gestured at the scroll and the three of them leaned in to take a look. It was a map, of... Qishan and Nightless City, actually. Lan SiZhui raised his eyebrows.

“Sect Leader Lan, no offense, but if you asked us, any of us could’ve drawn this map for you.” Jin Ling said, straightening up. Lan XiChen furrowed his brows as he looked at him. “We’ve studied this, remember?”

“Ah.” Lan XiChen looked down, face serious, then he chuckled. “Yes, I suppose you did. However, I did not ask for it, Meng Yao handed it over. I’ve asked him if your plan is suitable, sneaking you inside. He promised he’d make sure this route—” he trailed a finger over a route in the servants’ quarters, “is free, if you need to sneak inside.”

“Sect Leader Lan.” Lan SiZhui began and stepped back, bowing deeply. Lan XiChen turned to him with a surprised look at his serious tone. “If you wish we rather execute this plan and work in cover, we will do it this way. It was our primary plan anyways, so it’s no trouble to change it now.”

“We don’t even know if you can control the puppet.” Jin Ling frowned. “Of course, if it doesn’t work we will do this instead.” He gestured at the map. “Why are you saying this now?”

“Sect Leader Lan.” Lan SiZhui said, still in a salute. “You do not need to openly use my cultivation method to fight Wen RuoHan.”

“Is this about my fight with Sect Leader Jiang earlier?” Lan XiChen furrowed his brows and lightly brought Lan SiZhui out from his bow. “SiZhui, I appreciate your concern, but frankly, that had nothing to do with you. Sect Leader Jiang was right to warn me, for he is my elder, but the decision is mine to make. No one is pressuring me from either side.”

“Sect Leader Lan, the truth is, until Sect Leader Jiang didn’t say those things, I didn’t even think of them. But he is right.” He sighed, frustrated. “ZeWu-Jun, we’ve been down this path before. I know you do not want to know of the future, but seeing it is not a possibility anymore, I want to share.

“The YiLing Patriarch we talk about is indeed one of our own. Specifically, a Jiang Sect disciple. He was also a demonic cultivator. When I’ve been tossed into the Burial Mounds, I was actually tossed in instead of him. If we didn’t save Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu, he would’ve been the one to end up there. He would have suffered for three months, and in the end, out of desperation, he would’ve created his method of demonic cultivation without prior knowledge of the dark path.

“In our time, the YiLing Patriarch used his demonic cultivation to fight the Wen. In the end, in Nightless City, he revealed to have refined the last Yin Iron shard into the so-called Stygian Tiger Amulet, and thanks to him, Wen RuoHan had been killed. However, not even a year later the Sects turned against him because they saw him possess a Yin Iron shard and

wanted it gone, but he wouldn't give it up. This, among other offenses resulted in him being cast out of the Jiang Sect and hated and feared by the people. In the end, the four Sects had rallied against him, killing his people and in the end, he had no choice but to destroy the Stygian Tiger Amulet, just to ensure no one would have possession of it, and this killed him.

"It happened way before our time, but just two years ago he was still a feared name and a hated figure. When he returned from the dead, the Jiang Sect Leader almost killed him just because he suspected he might be the YiLing Patriarch. If Sect Leader Jiang didn't cast him out from his Sect, he would've subjected his whole Sect to this fate.

"Sect Leader Lan, while I know this is not my place to say so, Sect Leader Jiang is right. The risks you're willing to take are greater than you can imagine and I do not wish to bring the same hardships onto you and the Lan Sect that took me in out of kindness."

There was a pause following his speech and Lan XiChen studied him for a long while. Neither Jin Ling nor Lan JingYi said anything, which Lan SiZhui appreciated. He did not wish to hear reassurances or promises. That was not why he said all of this, but because he wanted his Sect to be safe. Driving the point home was the only way to do it, even if he had to reveal a big part of the future to do so.

"I understand." Lan XiChen said in the end quietly. "However, you are not the YiLing Patriarch, nor am I the Jiang Sect Leader. Our past might be the same, but our futures are not." He smiled at him. "I believe in righteousness. I do not wish to participate in associating with demonic cultivation either. As my brother said, the rules are clear about this. But the rules were written with peace in mind and we're at war. Do the rules still stand? How do we uphold justice if we die and let innocents die, while it was in our power to help? I believe JingYi's father taught him the same lesson once." He turned to the other boy, who seemed taken aback by being spoken of. Lan XiChen smiled at him as well, then turned back to Lan SiZhui.

"Sect Leader Jiang is right in that I am young. I am actually the same age as you are. All my life the elders had made decisions for my Sect, under my father's lead and after his death as well. I thought once I came of age, I'd change things, I'd make my own decisions. In reality, all my life others made the decisions and I was content with it. But since I've learned your secret I couldn't confide in the elders and since then I realized this is not how a Sect should be led. MingJue's elders are mere advisors, as they are to the older Sect Leaders, yet here I am depending so much on them. In this matter, so far from Cloud Recesses, I cannot. Perhaps that made me realize I should not. I am Sect Leader, after all."

"But—" Lan SiZhui began, but Jin Ling stepped forward, cutting him off with a scoff.

"Lan SiZhui, ZeWu-Jun made a decision. As your Sect Leader, you should respect it." He said. "When you're in his situation, it is easy to leave everything to the elders. If he's willing to make his own decision, it is not made lightly." Jin Ling spoke with experience and in the face of that, Lan SiZhui didn't dare to argue.

After all, Jin Ling was in almost the same situation Lan XiChen had been only recently. When Jin GuangYao died, Jin Ling was the one following him as the head of the Jin Sect. When a junior like him was the only remaining member of the main family, the Sect's elders

often took over the more serious Sect duties while assigning one of them to mentor the Sect Heir to coach him how to lead the Sect. Once the Heir turned twenty, they would not need the mentor anymore and could take over more responsibilities, and the Sect elders would return to their duties as his advisors.

After Jin GuangYao's betrayal Jin Ling had distrusted the Sect elders and chose not to take a mentor and keep the Sect elders as slightly more than advisors. They could make decisions but they would not be executed without Jin Ling's permission.

This wasn't unheard of, after all, Nie MingJue also did this with his own elders. Many admired this kind of way to lead the Sect before one turned twenty, for it spoke of a confident character. But most of the time it didn't actually work out and the Sect Leaders gave in, entrusting the elders with the decisions. Nie MingJue didn't give up though and by the time he came of age, he was already leading the Sect with all the confidence of a seasoned Sect Leader.

Jin Ling was only Sect Leader for a few months before they came to the past, so he didn't experience the full extent of how difficult it must be to lead a Sect all on his own. But at the same time, he probably had enough time at the head of the Sect to experience the pressure of his elders wanting him to step back and learn the ropes first before he started making the decisions.

As someone who was never destined to become Sect Leader, Lan SiZhui could not grasp the kind of responsibility that rested on these people's shoulders, so if Lan XiChen and Jin Ling also said he should respect the decision, he would. He just hoped that he wouldn't ruin the Sect his adoptive father kindly took him into and raised him in, even though he was, by multiple accounts, the enemy's child.

He bowed silently and he saw a pleased look pass in Lan XiChen's eyes.

"Alright. So, tomorrow you will see if you can control the puppet. If it is a success, nobody will need to sneak inside the Palace. If it is not, then MingJue will go with you."

"Is that a good idea?" Jin Ling frowned, and Lan XiChen raised his eyebrows at him. "Ah, Un—Meng Yao used to be a protégé of Nie MingJue. If he sees him in Nightless City, will it not enrage him? It could jeopardize the mission."

"MingJue will understand." Lan XiChen said confidently.

"What if he doesn't?" Jin Ling hummed.

"You'd think you want less people to trust him." Lan JingYi noted from the side. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"Knowing Nie MingJue's character, he won't. But it would be safer if only we went."

"MingJue is bent on going." Lan XiChen sighed. "I cannot talk him out of it, so I thought it would be better if he went with you. Knowing him, if he has a task to carry out, he will try



not to get distracted. Even if he meets Meng Yao, if he is tasked to help you accomplish your task, he will concentrate on that.”

“Well, you’re the one who knows him.” Jin Ling shrugged. “Now, can we go back to sleep? It is the middle of the night.”

“Of course.” Lan XiChen chuckled, rolling up the scroll and turning to them. “Sorry for waking you. I wanted to share this with you before you begin your experiments tomorrow. Sleep well, boys.”

“Good night, Sect Leader Lan.” The boys echoed with a bow, then left the tent. As they walked back, Lan JingYi yawned.

“I hope the first plan works. I don’t want to sneak into the Palace.”

“Me either.” Jin Ling answered darkly. “It’s enough to have to watch people praise my uncle. I do not need to work with him.”

“We don’t even know yet if people will praise him. Maybe I’ll be the one killing Wen RuoHan and they will give me a suitable title.” Lan JingYi grinned.

“Keep on dreaming. The only thing they’ll call you is ‘idiot’.” Jin Ling snorted.

“MouShi, one day you’ll learn not to underestimate me.” Lan JingYi said.

“I eagerly await that day.” Jin Ling nodded as he halted. “Until then, dream about killing Wen RuoHan, because that’s the only place it will happen.” He said, then bowed with a mocking expression and turned to go towards the Jin disciples’ quarters.

“MouShi is so mean I wonder if he will ever get married!” Lan JingYi called after him, but Jin Ling just waved his hand over his shoulder dismissively, while someone shouted from one of the tents:

“Shut up! It’s the middle of the night!”

♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪

The next day found Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling in front of the puppet. The man’s skin had greyed and Lan SiZhui was sure he was long dead. The cracks down his chest revealed raw flesh. His fingers were curled like claws. As Lan SiZhui watched him struggle, he felt sorry for him. Whoever he was before Wen RuoHan’s Yin Iron affected him, didn’t deserve it.

“Who do you think this was before he got turned into this?” Lan JingYi wondered out loud echoing Lan SiZhui’s thoughts.

“Look at his clothes. As tattered and dirty they are, it is obvious.” Jin Ling answered next to him, his arms crossed over his chest. Now that Lan SiZhui looked, he also noticed the grey underrobes and black over robes, simple, stating his status clearly, the twisted knot the Wen Sect’s people usually used to hold their hair back and how well his hands were manicured.

He was a servant judging by the clothes and judging by his hairstyle he was a Wen. His hands were well-maintained, which meant he served someone important.

“Wen RuoHan’s servant?” He asked and Jin Ling nodded.

“I have to give it to Wei WuXian. He knows what he’s doing, even if it doesn’t look like it.”

“Alright.” Lan JingYi sighed. “We won’t get anywhere if we just stare at him.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then the three of them went over to where they judged would be far enough away. The two soldiers holding the binds on the puppet waited anxiously. Jin Ling shuffled one of his feet in the dirt, as if making sure his shoe was on the ground before he pulled out several arrows, holding them aloof in one hand, only placing one in position.

“Shouldn’t you aim all of them?” Lan JingYi frowned at him from where he prepared several talismans and Zhameng.

“If I use a quiver it’ll take longer to pick out a new arrow.” Jin Ling said. “Like this.” He turned and shot three arrows one by one in quick sequence into a tree to the side. He turned back to Lan JingYi. “See?”

“That’s fast! I didn’t even see you switching to a new one. Why don’t you always do it like this?”

“I drop the arrows when I’m moving.” Jin Ling muttered under his breath. Lan SiZhui repressed his smile.

“What?” Lan JingYi frowned. “I can’t hear you. Speak up.”

“I said I do it like this because I replaced my quiver.” Jin Ling glared at him, and helpfully, Lan SiZhui didn’t point out the quiver lying in front of Jin Ling on the ground.

“I always thought you were a neat and organized person, how can you lose things so easily?” Lan JingYi shook his head as if disappointed and turned back to the puppet.

Lan SiZhui sat between the two of them and pulled out Hudie.

“I’ll play *Rest* first, to see if he reacts to it.” Lan SiZhui said, then began to play, dividing his attention between the strings and the puppet in front of him.

The puppet was restless to begin with trashing and roaring at them. As Lan SiZhui played, it didn’t seem calmer, more so, it became more agitated. Lan SiZhui frowned and changed the tune. This was something he’d played in the Burial Mounds, to command resentful energy away, to keep the fierce corpses at bay. The puppet quieted slowly and soon, it sank onto its knees. Lan SiZhui kept playing as he said:

“Release him.” He told the two guards holding the binds and they exchanged a look before slowly, unsurely, let go. The puppet stayed for a moment in a kneeling position, then stood, swaying from side to side. It started towards the three of them, and Jin Ling’s bow creaked as

he pulled the string back. “Don’t.” Lan SiZhui told Jin Ling as he played. The puppet stopped not far from them, then turned and headed towards the woods.

“It’s escaping!” Lan JingYi said, but Lan SiZhui shook his head. The puppet headed ahead, then stopped in front of the tree Jin Ling had shot the arrows into it. At Lan SiZhui’s command, it took one arrow out at the time until all three was in his hands. Lan SiZhui played and the puppet turned back, heading back towards them, stopping where he had before, letting the arrows fall on the ground, then turned its back to them and went back to his original position, sinking to his knees.

“Get a hold of him.” Lan SiZhui told the guards, who hesitated for a moment, then picked up the binds and held it as they had before. “I’m going to release him, get ready.” Lan SiZhui warned them, then played the last notes before the smoothing his palm over the strings to stop their resonance. The puppet immediately roared, standing and trying to break out of its binds, but they held. Lan SiZhui sighed and dropped his shoulders, releasing the tension in his body.

“It worked.” Jin Ling said, walking ahead and picking up the three arrows. He turned to face Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi. “It is decided then. We march into Nightless City.”

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“To get to Nightless City, first we need to fight our way through Qishan.” Nie MingJue said grimly. Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng stood shoulder-to-shoulder beside Jiang FengMian, Jin Ling and an older Jin disciple, who was also present on earlier occasions stood next to Jin ZiXuan. Nie MingJue had his two most trusted subordinates by his side. Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Lan WangJi stood next to Lan XiChen. Several smaller Clan Leaders were also present, but they stood behind them.

“The city is made of four important districts.” Lan XiChen said, stepping forward to show it on the map. “This here is the main district with the road to Nightless city, but there is also a road from here, leading there.” He pointed at another point on the map. “The two meet here, there is no other way to Nightless City except through the mountains here and here, but just like in Cloud Recesses, if one is not familiar with them, they could easily die on them.”

“We go separately.” Nie MingJue said, pointing at the main district. “Sect Leader Lan and I will lead the troops through here, while Sect Leader Jiang and Young Master Jin go through here.” He pointed at the other road. “I will ask some smaller Clan Leaders to stay in the city and look out for threats from our backs, as we have done at the border.”

“And if we encounter puppets?” Jin ZiXuan asked. Before anyone could answer, however, there was a commotion outside the tent and everyone inside turned to look towards the entrance.

“Sect Leader! Sect Leader Lan!” Someone cried and Lan XiChen exchanged a look with Nie MingJue, who then nodded to the guards at the entrance. They acknowledged the command and pulled away the flap, letting the Lan disciple inside. He was incredibly disorderly. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days and his clothes were dirty, torn at some places. He had patches of sweat around his neck and his hair was also stuck to his face from sweat as well as

tangled. Everyone looked on, alarmed as he ran up to Lan XiChen and dropped on his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground.

“What happened?” Lan XiChen asked, alarmed, and crouched to help the disciple up. He would not budge, but he said:

“Sect Leader Lan, please punish me! This disciple had failed you!”

“What is it?” Nie MingJue came around to ask the disciple as well. Finally, he looked up, face tear-soaked.

“Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu, they... they escaped! Sect Leader Lan!”

“Escaped?” Lan XiChen looked at him with wide eyes. “How did this happen? Is everyone in Cloud Recesses alright?”

“Three people died and four’s Golden Cores were destroyed.” The disciple shook his head. “Twelve got injured but would make a recovery. Grandmaster Lan also got injured, he is in a coma.”

“What?” Lan XiChen gaped at the disciple, exchanging a look with his brother. Then, he visibly collected himself. “Alright, calm down.” Lan XiChen looked around.

“Here.” Nie MingJue showed the way to a table that had been pushed to the side to give space to the strategy board in the middle, but now some of the smaller Clan members hurried over and pulled the table out to make space for the disciple. Another one poured water to him. As he was sat down, he still wouldn’t look at Lan XiChen.

“Tell me what happened exactly.” Lan XiChen requested softly, once the disciple drank.

“It was an ordinary day. We were just talking amongst ourselves, but I guess Wen Chao heard us talking about how well the war was proceeding. That night, he complained about a sharp pain in his abdomen, so naturally, we called a healer over. In his weakened state we were careless and didn’t expect him to be faking the injury. He stole the healer’s tool and threatened to kill him if we didn’t free Wen ZhuLiu and bring him over, so we... We did. And Wen ZhuLiu, after he exchanged a few polite words with Wen Chao, Wen Chao told him it was time to return home. Wen ZhuLiu then took hold of my junior and destroyed his Core! I’ve tried to stop him, but he knocked me unconscious. By the time I came to, my peers told me they were gone. They sneaked out through the mountains, but they were seen two days later near Luling.”

“How long ago was this?” Nie MingJue frowned.

“About a week ago.” The disciple said. “I rushed here as soon as the elders ordered.”

“You came even though you were injured?” Lan XiChen frowned, but the disciple shook his head.

“Sect Leader Lan, I was barely hit, and I was the one who asked to come.”

“Alright. ShuAn, take your junior to the healer.” Lan XiChen addressed someone near the entrance, a Lan disciple who must’ve entered after the messenger came. Lan SiZhui didn’t even notice him enter, but now he came over, bowed and took hold of the disciple.

“B-but Sect Leader—” The disciple began, but Lan XiChen shook his head.

“Liang, you did well to come and tell us. You did what you were supposed to. Do not stress. Rest now.”

With this, ShuAn took Liang away. Lan XiChen sighed and straightened up.

“So, they’ve escaped at last.” Nie MingJue said, his face stormy.

“It was to be expected.” Lan SiZhui said quietly, and the Sect Leaders turned to look at him. Lan SiZhui’s face reddened. “Ah, it’s just that... When I talked to them after they were captured, they appeared overly calm about their situation. I found it suspicious back then, but I believed what they said. Wen Chao said his father would come for him and Wen ZhuLiu said they would not be harmed, so there was no point worrying. Perhaps, they were not concerned because they knew we’d reach Qishan and they had time to escape. Besides, the mountains are dangerous, yet they escaped and two days later showed up alive. This is highly suspicious.”

“They either studied the mountains or had external help.” Nie MingJue nodded, following his logic.

“We took away their swords, so they should be slow to return.” Jiang FengMian said.

“But if they had external help, then they might already be here.” Lan JingYi argued.

“Either way, it doesn’t matter much.” Nie MingJue said. “If they are not here, we can hunt them down later. If they are here, they are just two more soldiers in Wen RuoHan’s army.”

“You forget that Wen ZhuLiu can melt Golden Cores?” Jin Ling frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. “I knew we should’ve killed them.”

“I agree with MingJue.” Lan XiChen said after a pause. “While Core-Melting Hand is dangerous, he is but one man. This doesn’t change our plans.”

“It’s—” Jin Ling began, then pressed his lips together, looking towards his uncle. Lan SiZhui frowned. “Wen ZhuLiu should not be underestimated.”

“We aren’t underestimating him, Jin Ling.” Jiang FengMian shook his head. “But Sect Leader Lan and Sect Leader Nie are right. Wen ZhuLiu’s powers are dangerous, but so is a soldier with a sword and so are puppets.”

“You say this because you don’t think it could happen to you.” Jin Ling snapped, looking at his grandfather. “But I tell you it can and it does.”

“MouShi, what’s your problem?” Lan JingYi frowned. “I didn’t know you were afraid of Wen ZhuLiu.”

“I’m—” Jin Ling huffed. “And what if I am? It is not unreasonable.”

“No.” Lan JingYi blinked at him. “But you don’t usually admit something like this.”

“Well, now I do.” Jin Ling glared back. “You have a problem with that?”

“Of course not. I’m proud of your personal growth.” Lan JingYi grinned at him, and with a smile, Lan SiZhui noted his bait had worked and instead of worried, Jin Ling’s expression turned annoyed.

“You—! One of these days, I’ll break your legs, Lan JingYi. Mark my words.”

“MouShi, we’re all working together now as allies. Let us postpone this for after the war.” Lan JingYi grinned and Jin Ling rolled his eyes, shaking his head. The whole room felt less tense after their usual display, and soon, they returned to the strategy discussion.

## Wrath II.

“Lan SiZhui, even though you’ve offered to do this, nobody expects so much from you.” Lan XiChen said as they were getting ready to leave a few days later. It wasn’t raining for once, and Lan SiZhui wondered if that was a good sign or a bad one. “Even if you don’t manipulate the puppets, your efforts will not be in vain.”

“ZeWu-Jun, I wouldn’t have to do this if it wasn’t for our meddling.” Lan SiZhui said grimly, not looking at Lan XiChen as he adjusted the saddle of his horse, even though he knew about as much about horse riding as he did about boat riding. He was taught as part of his basic training, how to make the horse go in the direction he wanted it to, but up on the mountain they didn’t have horses. This particular lesson was taught on a week-long course they took outside Cloud Recesses when they were preparing to go on their first night-hunt and needed to learn some things that would be impossible to learn on the mountain. Horseback riding was always the Nie and Jin Sects’ expertise, even Yunmeng disciples looked unsure of the animals between their legs.

“Do not do this out of guilt either.” Lan XiChen shook his head. “Despite what Lan JingYi says, everyone’s lives is not your responsibility.”

“That would’ve been true in the past when we just arrived.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “However, that was back when we didn’t change anything. The moment Jin Ling stood in front of the sword destined to Sect Leader Jiang, we became responsible.”

“So, that’s what changed everything.” Lan XiChen nodded, looking out at the gates in front of them. Behind them the rest of the army was similarly preparing to depart. They weren’t afraid to talk as they were far enough away, but they kept their voices low. “I’ve wondered, though some hints you gave me made me suspicious, but now you’ve confirmed.”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together. He didn’t mean to. “Sorry, ZeWu-Jun. I know you said you didn’t want to know.”

“You felt I needed to.” Lan XiChen smiled at him, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “I understand why you did. It’s alright. Since it won’t happen anyways.”

“There are still things that might.” Lan SiZhui added quietly. “There’s a long history between us and this moment.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Lan XiChen told him. Before they could continue, however, Nie MingJue walked his horse over from where he’d been talking to some disciples a few meters away and stopped by Lan XiChen’s horse.

“We are ready.” He reported. “Some will stay back to care for the wounded and make sure the camp is protected.”

“Good.” Lan XiChen nodded, then looked over at Lan SiZhui, who was still standing next to his horse. “Let us go then.” Lan SiZhui nodded and pulled himself up onto the horse. Before

they could depart, however, a familiar shout diverted their attention.

“You cannot do this!” Jin Ling snapped, loud enough for the whole army to hear.

“What’s going on over there?” Nie MingJue frowned, looking over, just like everyone else, to see Jin Ling glaring at Jin ZiXuan, who seemed utterly indifferent and ignorant at the yelling.

“I am not some mere servant you can order around!” Jin Ling practically screamed.

“It’s best if I go over, make sure he doesn’t say something.” Lan SiZhui said and Lan XiChen also turned his horse that way.

“I’ll go with.” He said, and the two of them rode over. By the time they arrived, Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan were sitting atop their horses in a ring of disciples, like they were on a stage, being a particularly interesting act. “Young Master Jin, what seems to be the issue?” Lan XiChen called over when they were only a few steps away.

“I was just telling Young Master Jin that I was looking forward to the battle in Nightless City, when he told me I was not going! That I was to stay in Qishan, because archers would be pointless in the Palace!” Jin Ling said, not taking his eyes off Jin ZiXuan.

“Of course. This was the arranged strategy. You yourself also agreed.” Jin ZiXuan said, not phased in the least.

“I am going!” Jin Ling, in the absence of a table, slapped his own thigh, hard. Lan SiZhui was grateful he didn’t hit the horse at least.

“Why should you? You’re an archer. Archers are to stay in Qishan.” Jin ZiXuan finally looked at Jin Ling. “I will not say again. You’re holding up the envoy. Let us go.” And he turned his horse around, his back to Jin Ling.

“Don’t you dare ignore me!” Jin Ling fumed.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui rode over, placing a hand on his shoulder. Jin Ling shrugged it off. “Young Master Jin, would you please reconsider your decision?” Lan SiZhui turned to Jin ZiXuan then. The other heaved a sigh and turned to face them once more, looking at Lan SiZhui coldly.

“Jin Ling doesn’t have a spiritual sword. He *lost* it.” He sneered. “He is barely seventeen and he is hot headed. Why should I take him to the battlefield, with qualities like this? He will get us killed.”

“Barely seventeen?! You’re only sixteen and you fought less than me! By your age I have been held at sword point, my throat was threatened to be cut, not to mention I’ve been battling the Wen when you were still in Koi Tower, being the perfect son of your father! And don’t you of all people talk about my sword! I didn’t lose it! I told you already, someone else has it. Has your own sword not been taken by the Wen?” Jin Ling shouted, insulted.

“Then it’s been returned. You didn’t have a sword since a year ago.” Jin ZiXuan glared back. “So where is it?”



“Young Master Jin, isn’t Jin Ling’s sword with you?” Came a familiar drawl from the side as Wei WuXian also trotted his horse over to see what the holdup was.

“How could I have it? I didn’t even know this disciple until a year ago.” Jin ZiXuan blinked at him and Wei WuXian frowned, looking over at Jin Ling, who bowed his head, either in embarrassment or anger, Lan SiZhui couldn’t tell.

“Lan SiZhui, is my memory faulty again? You were also there, you remember Jin Ling saying Jin ZiXuan had his sword in Cloud Recesses, right?” Lan SiZhui shared a look with Lan XiChen, unsure what to say. In the end, it was Lan XiChen who spoke up.

“It doesn’t matter where the sword is. The issue isn’t that.” Lan XiChen turned to Jin ZiXuan. “Young Master Jin, as I told you earlier, Jin Ling is an important part of this campaign. Truthfully...” He looked over at Jin Ling, finding him glaring back and sighed. “When I recommended you keep him close at all times, I did it because I’m concerned.

“Your father did not approve of you coming here, and so, officially, the Jin Sect disciples here have all deserted from the Sect. I know once we return, they will be taken back without any consequences, so this doesn’t weight much in their eyes. But as a fellow Sect Leader, I also know Jin GuangShan must worry about you greatly. He cannot officially support you, for he officially wishes to remain neutral in this war, so he cannot send you people to look after you.

“I got to know Jin Ling during this past year quite well, and I believe his character is most noble. He wants to prove his worth, not just to the Jin Sect, but to you personally as well. In my opinion, there’s no greater motivator than wishing to impress someone, and because of that, I figured if he guarded you personally, I’d rest well, knowing you were safe as long as he looked out for you. Jin Ling’s friends are also few and those he has will all be on the battlefield in Nightless City as well. Because of this, please, allow him to come with us and keep looking out for us.”

Jin Ling’s face was pinched and red, most likely from embarrassment. Lan SiZhui saw he wanted to deny everything Lan XiChen just said, as per his character, but he was grateful that for once, Jin Ling didn’t. Lan XiChen could’ve just ordered Jin ZiXuan to take Jin Ling with him, but as they were in front of the whole Jin force and their altercation was as public as it gets it would’ve been an outright insult to do so.

Jin ZiXuan would’ve been forced to defend his honor and status as Sect Heir, and that would’ve ended in a serious argument, outfall, if not outright duel between the Lan and Jin Sects. On the brink of a battle as important as this was, they couldn’t afford something like this, so Lan XiChen choose the least favorable option and explained the situation the best he could, even if half of it was a lie.

Like this, a Sect Leader asking if not begging to Jin ZiXuan to do this, Jin ZiXuan would appear noble and courteous if he allowed it, and Lan XiChen would not lose face because he would appear as a caring and kind Sect Leader, looking out for even a junior of another Sect.

Everyone awaited Jin ZiXuan’s decision with their breaths held back. In the end, Jin ZiXuan schooled his expression, his scowl smoothing out and returning to the impassive, cold expression he always wore. He gave the smallest of nods and said loudly: “So be it.”

“Thank you, Young Master Jin.” Lan XiChen smiled warmly at him. “I’m sure Jin Ling is most grateful as well.” Every eye turned to Jin Ling then, who had an expression as if he was questioning Lan XiChen’s sanity. In the end, with an exchanged look, he inclined his head, as if agreeing. Everyone relaxed at that, and with parting nods, everyone, including Wei WuXian, though he reluctantly, headed back to their own places. Before the Lan could leave as well, Jin Ling made a noise and kicked his horse, it kicking up dirt as he guided it right in front of Lan XiChen’s.

“Ah, right. Sorry about that, Jin Ling.” Lan XiChen said, and Lan SiZhui was confused until Jin Ling opened his mouth, moving his jaw around. He glared daggers at Lan XiChen.

“You silence me one more time and I’ll turn my bow on you, Lan XiChen. I do not care if you’re Sect Leader or not.” He told him, tone dead serious. Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as he realized Jin Ling had been silenced ever since Lan XiChen began to talk! With this threat, Jin Ling rode back behind Jin ZiXuan, avoiding everyone’s looks, and Lan XiChen stirred his horse back towards the gates. Lan SiZhui cast one last look towards Jin Ling, then followed.

“Lan SiZhui, once this is over, you’ll have to tell me how to compensate Jin Ling.” Lan XiChen mentioned lightly as they rode back. “He is right to be mad at me. I should’ve let him handle this, but I was afraid he would start a fight. We cannot afford that right now.”

“ZeWu-Jun, if I figure out how to compensate Jin Ling, I’ll tell you.” Lan SiZhui nodded, and Lan XiChen turned back, gaze curious. Lan SiZhui shrugged at the unasked question: *‘You don’t know?’* “He usually doesn’t hold grudges. If he does, they’re usually reasonable enough that nobody wants to compensate him for them.”

“Hm. With his character, I’d have thought he has a hard time letting things go.”

“He mainly just hates when people apologize to him, so he just ignores the offense, pretends it never happened.”

“I wonder why.” Lan XiChen hummed.

“If you apologize to him, you’re kind to him, and he learned people mostly try to be nice to him because they pity him. His parents died when he was still a toddler and because of that, people always handle him delicately. He just wants to be like everyone else. Since he sees kindness as people handling him specially, he will just get mad for it.”

“He must’ve had the strangest upbringing.” Lan XiChen shook his head in wonderment.

“Is it resolved?” Nie MingJue asked as they returned. Lan XiChen nodded, so he did as well. “Then let us go.” With this, he gestured at the guards at the gates, who opened it and they walked out, horses and people leaving a cloud of dust behind them.



Despite the circumstances of entering the city, Qishan was beautiful. Lan SiZhui had only seen it twice, once in his own time, with Wen Ning. Back then, it was just as intact as it was now, but it seemed there was always a dark cloud hanging over it. People who lived here

were nor happy nor depressed. They just were. It was the greyest city Lan SiZhui had ever been at.

Months ago, he'd been here, with a broken leg, trailing after his captors. He could not appreciate the wide streets, the colorful stalls and the happy people. Now he looked around, and even as people looked upon them scared and cautious, pulling back from the streets, he could appreciate the beauty. The streets were wide, several colorful strings hung between the buildings. In this time of the year, there were many red lanterns hung up, red fans, red cloths, red jewelry sold. It was a high contrast from the white-painted walls of the houses, the deep brown rooftops, the many trees and flowers left to grow here and there.

The horses' hooves were making a loud noise on the stones as they moved through the city. They had expected the Wen army to wait for them with great forces, and they were all on edge. They ignored the civilians leaving in a hurry to get out of their way. Someone threw a cabbage at them, but he was also ignored when Lan XiChen glanced at the disciple the vegetable hit.

"Where are they?" Nie MingJue muttered, sounding as tense as Lan SiZhui felt himself being.

"Maybe they're waiting closer to Nightless City." Lan XiChen answered next to him. Lan SiZhui shared a look with Lan JingYi who rode next to him. In his eyes, Lan SiZhui also saw he found the situation strange.

"Up ahead!" Someone called, a scout that went ahead on the roofs.

"Well, that answers the question." Lan JingYi said.

"Be alert. Do not harm the civilians." Nie MingJue said as he pulled out Baxia. They were almost at the edge of the city, on the road leading to Nightless City. As they turned the corner, they saw them, Wen soldiers in neat rows. Here, there were no civilians at all unlike further from the Nightless City. Lan SiZhui was glad the Wen at least minded their own civilians and brought the battle to the edge of the city.

The four Sects' envoy stopped momentarily, facing the Wen. The Wen didn't have horses, but there were a lot of them, standing with their weapons drawn, faces determined. Lan SiZhui felt a pang of sympathy for them. They were just trying to protect their homes.

"Beat the drum." Nie MingJue said. As soon as it began, he gave a battle cry and kicked his horse.

Lan SiZhui never fought from horseback before. He felt clumsy as he hacked his sword, but strangely, he hit Wen soldiers effectively. Suddenly, a few minutes into the fight, Lan SiZhui's horse buckled violently, and he fell with an alarmed cry. Before the horse fell on him, someone from behind took hold of his robes and pulled him away just in time. Lan SiZhui saw the horse only had a cut on its leg and wanted to help, but the person who pulled him away held him back.

“Leave it. If it stays alive by the end of the battle people will nurse it back to health or eat it anyways.” Nie MingJue said. “There’s no point. Come on.” He pulled Lan SiZhui along. Before they got far, he had to block an attack with Baxia, his knees buckling from the force. Seeing he was pulling Lan SiZhui along uselessly, he decided to contribute. Under Nie MingJue’s arm, he struck out with his hand and the soldier who attacked them flew back into another, the two of them falling onto the ground, unconscious. Nie MingJue grunted and nodded to him with a pleased expression. Lan SiZhui returned the nod, then gripped his own sword and turning his back to Nie MingJue’s, they began fighting the soldiers around them.

The battle took longer than expected. There were reinforcements coming from the side streets. Lan SiZhui was sure they’ve been there for half an hour before anything noteworthy happened.

It was a signal flare from across the town. Before they marched in, they agreed to only use three signals: red for needing help, blue for getting their forces through the soldiers, and yellow for complete victory. The signal they saw came from the direction where Jiang FengMian and Jin ZiXuan’s forces were, and it was blue.

“Damn.” Nie MingJue grunted. “You should’ve gone with them. You’d be through by now.”

“Sect Leader Nie, ZeWu—” He had to stop to evade an attack and attack back. Once he did, he continued. “ZeWu-Jun is here and so my place is also here.”

“JingYi!” They heard said man’s voice and Lan SiZhui was alarmed before a talisman hit the soldier he’d been fighting. As he looked around to see Lan JingYi, he saw the Wen forces were fewer in numbers, finally. Lan JingYi stood on the street where they needed to go.

“SiZhui! We’re through!” As he said this, the blue flare went up. “Let’s go!”

“Yes!” Lan SiZhui said, then waited for Nie MingJue. The three of them went through the fighting sides, emerging from the crowd outside the city. There, Lan XiChen was sitting on his horse, playing his flute. Several men were fighting puppets around him, Lan disciples defending the Sect Leader on the horse.

“Sect Leader.” One of Nie MingJue’s men, Nie ZongHui came up to them, jogging. He bowed shallowly. “The smaller Clans have arrived to support our backs. If we give away the enemy we can head to Nightless City.”

“Very good.” Nie MingJue nodded. “SiZhui.” He nodded to Lan SiZhui, who understood what he meant and sheathed his sword, pulling out Hudie. Lan XiChen also had Liebing raised, and as Lan SiZhui heard the first notes of Lan XiChen’s song, he also strummed the strings. Lan JingYi and Nie MingJue waited until the puppets froze, then watched as the others cut them down.

Before they had to really begin their fight with the puppets, new forces arrived from the city. The Wen had been beaten back enough for the smaller Clans to also reach this point.

“XiChen, leave them! Let us go!” Nie MingJue called out and Lan XiChen looked up and over, nodding to them. They retreated with their remaining forces towards Nightless City.

They didn't get rid of the puppets entirely and new ones would most likely appear, but they had to move, so they eventually left. Lan SiZhui just hoped they would be fast enough to stop Wen RuoHan before the smaller Clans' people were too overwhelmed with the puppets.

They thought about leaving a disciple here who could play *Rest*, but in reality, it wasn't Lan XiChen's song that subdued the puppets successfully. It might've been effective at the border where Wen Xu's control over them was lousy, but here, this close to Nightless City the puppets were controlled directly by Wen RuoHan. And it wasn't like Lan SiZhui could teach the Lan disciples the old Qin language, for this was still technically forbidden knowledge in the Lan Sect. Whether they were at war or not, nobody risk using this carelessly.

"Let's go!" Nie MingJue called out, and so the lot of them headed forward on the road towards Nightless City.

They hiked for a while, following the road Lan XiChen pointed out to them on the map. Eventually they reached the junctions where their road and the one on the other side of Qishan met. There they met Jiang Cheng, Wei WuXian, Lan WangJi, Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan along with most of their own troops. Since they broke through the Wen forces much sooner than Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue's team, it was expected to see them there.

"How was it?" Nie MingJue asked them once they exchanged courtesies.

"Father got wounded." Jiang Cheng said, his face in a frown. "A disciple headed back to the camp with him."

"How serious is it?" Lan XiChen asked, eyes wide.

"A cut on his torso." Jiang Cheng shook his head. "I have no idea, but he was awake and talking when we parted. He insisted we come here."

"Puppets chased us here." Lan WangJi said.

"We also ran into some." Lan XiChen nodded. "We've successfully subdued them in time."

"I think they're intending to trap us in Nightless City." Wei WuXian said and Lan XiChen's gaze flicked to Jin Ling before he turned back to Wei WuXian and nodded.

"We suspected that was going to be the case. Thankfully enough of us got through that the Wen army would have a hard time with us."

"Alright. Then let us rest here for an hour before we proceed." Nie MingJue said. The others all nodded and many soldiers settled within minutes of hearing they were taking a break. Lan SiZhui sat on the ground next to Jin Ling, Lan JingYi joining them. Wei WuXian, Lan WangJi, Jiang Cheng and Jin ZiXuan sat by them. Not surprisingly, Nie MingJue called Lan XiChen away, and they walked off from sight.

"Sect Leader Nie is going to insist on sneaking inside." Jin Ling said as he took a long pull from his waterskin, wiping his mouth afterwards with the back of his hand.

“How do you know?” Wei WuXian asked, tilting his head and leaning forward to address them.

“I don’t know, but that’s his character.” Jin Ling shook his head, frowning.

“Why would he sneak inside?” Jiang Cheng furrowed his brows.

“To assassinate Wen RuoHan.” Jin Ling explained. “He believes that’s the easiest way to win.”

“It’s not a bad plan.” Jin ZiXuan said.

“How would it be a good one though? Wen RuoHan has the Yin Iron.” Jin Ling shook his head. “He can turn anyone into a puppet.”

“Nie MingJue is a Sect Leader. His spiritual energy is strong.” Jin ZiXuan argued. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“The Yin Iron could control the Tortoise of Slaughter. You’ve met it in Dusk Creek mountain.” Jin Ling told his father. “You think a thing that can control *that*, wouldn’t be able to control a Sect Leader, just because he has a strong Core?”

While they were arguing, Lan SiZhui frowned and looked towards the outline of Nightless city. It wasn’t far per se, but it wasn’t close either. He felt an oppressing aura coming from that direction, and this made him uncomfortable. As the others sat around comfortably, he manipulated his limbs into lotus position and closed his eyes.

“Jin Ling is right.” Wei WuXian said. “Nie MingJue doesn’t know this?” He asked then.

“He knows.” Lan JingYi said. “But he’s stubborn and he believes it’s his job to kill Wen RuoHan to protect us all.”

“Like you don’t also have a hero complex.” Jin Ling told him. Lan JingYi huffed.

“I’m just following the rules and my parents’ teachings. It’s not like I’m trying to be a hero.”

“Lan SiZhui, are you okay?” Lan SiZhui blinked his eyes open, seeing Wei WuXian looking at him curiously, as well as everyone around him. He felt his face redden.

“Sorry. It’s just a headache.”

“It’s probably from the air.” Lan JingYi frowned, looking up and around, as if he could see the smell that came from the ground. “I’ve read the Nightless city was built upon a hill with fire inside it and that the Wen Sect uses the heat to cultivate as the Lan uses cold.”

“One thing is for sure. It’s unbelievably hot in here during the fall, so it’s even worse in the summer.” Wei WuXian said as he held out his waterskin towards Lan SiZhui. “I feel like we’re back at the indoctrination and I have to care for you and Lan Zhan, so you two don’t faint like Nie HuaiSang.” Lan SiZhui smiled tightly at him and took the waterskin.

“I’m just sleepy.” Lan JingYi said, and as if emphasizing his point, yawned widely. “You think I have time for a nap before we have to go?”

“Do not sleep in the middle of a battle.” Jin ZiXuan said, also looking towards Nightless City and not at them. “We better stay alert.”

“I didn’t plan on sleeping while we actually fight.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. Lan SiZhui chuckled at him and took another sip of water before handing the waterskin back.

He settled back into meditation as he let the conversation wash over him. They turned away from serious topics and began talking about sword styles and legwork. Lan SiZhui didn’t mind staying out of it.

Eventually, they had to go. Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen returned. It didn’t seem like they fought, but they were away for a while, they could’ve made up.

As they set out, Lan SiZhui felt nervous for the first time. They still didn’t know where Wen Chao or Wen ZhuLiu were and he wasn’t even sure his demonic cultivation would work in this close proximity to the Yin Iron. He also didn’t know for sure if they would be able to kill Wen RuoHan. Everything was different than in his timeline, and this scared him, more than he was willing to admit.

But he had no choice. They’ve all made their decisions. Lan XiChen had publicly declared to support him. Jin Ling stuck to his father and his sharp eyes took in everything around them. Wei WuXian gripped Suibian tightly and walked shoulder-to-shoulder with Jiang Cheng, Lan WangJi not far from his other side. Nie MingJue led them so confidently, he might’ve been sure of their victory. He looked over and caught Lan JingYi’s eye. He had promised to never let Lan JingYi hurt. He wasn’t sure he would be able to keep his promise.



Nightless City was just as the last time Lan SiZhui had been there. As they entered the main courtyard, several rows of soldiers stood on the other side, and a mystery was solved as they saw a man standing about halfway up the stairs, his arms crossed over his chest, looking down at them with a superior gaze, grimace on his face. Next to him stood another man, his arms behind his back, gaze sharp as he looked over the four Sects’ army.

“Nie MingJue!” Wen Chao began, his voice carrying over the space between them. “How dare you invade our home after we’ve showed mercy to your insignificant Sect? Aren’t you ashamed?”

“Wen Chao, so you’ve made it.” Nie MingJue called back.

“Yes.” Wen Chao smirked. “I was able to escape your poor attempts to keep me imprisoned. You know I wouldn’t have thought it would be as simple as having a map of the mountains in the Cloud Recesses to sneak out. I must thank my benefactor properly.”

Lan XiChen frowned, sharing a look with his brother. “You had help?” He asked back.

“Of course!” Wen Chao grinned. “How else would I have known the weak points of your precious mountains? How else would I have known how to escape? After all, the mountains surrounding the Cloud Recesses are deadly to anyone who didn’t grow up there, aren’t they?”

“And who was this great benefactor of yours?” Jin Ling called back, rolling his eyes.

“Young Master Jin, you ought to know.” Wen Chao shook his head. “But perhaps, he was too good and hid from you better than even he anticipated. After all, he played his part beautifully.” He paused, then turned his head slightly. “Huh? Still don’t know who it is?” He laughed. “Let me help you then!” He started pacing, counting the offenses on his fingers.

“Have you never wondered how come every time you looked for a Yin Iron shard, you were always late? What a coincidence! Have you never wondered how come he was the one to volunteer when my brother took Second Young Master Lan to Qishan? Why was he the only one to be able to receive letters during the indoctrination? And as the letters said, he knew Sect Leader Lan would be safe while he was hiding. Wonder why? He also knew Lan QiRen would be safe. Who would’ve known that? Have you never wondered how come he was the one to find a way out of Xuanwu cave with a Wen sword? Ah, I admit, we truly sold that play!” He laughed, delighted. “Wen Xu even broke his leg, what a pity! My brother was truly one for details.

“Have you never wondered how come you escaped Lotus Pier so easily? First, when you defended Jiang FengMian, he had a sword to my throat, yet he didn’t kill me. Although I admit, the wound he left was a bit deeper than I or my healers anticipated, but no matter. And why wouldn’t Wen ZhuLiu destroy his Core with that hit, why would he only wound him enough to still use his spiritual energy to let you escape? Do you truly think the Wen Sect is so incompetent to let you all run away like that?

“I gave you plenty of time to escape in YiLing as well. Aren’t I generous? And then, did you really believe I’d tossed him into the Burial Mounds?” He laughed again. “You all know this, nobody survives the Burial Mounds! Of course, he was nice and comfortable during that time. He was so nice, too, he drew us a map of the Cloud Recesses’ mountains, so when his plan to capture us and bring us to there, we would be able to get out safely.”

Lan SiZhui felt frozen in place, unable to move, say or do anything. His heart pounded loudly in his chest and his legs felt too weak to hold him up, yet it was like he was completely frozen. This felt like a dream, no, a nightmare. One he ought to have after his heritage was revealed in the future. The world swayed in front of him, as if spinning. He didn’t understand. Why was Wen Chao doing this? Why was he lying about this? Lan SiZhui knew Wen Chao hated him and he wasn’t nursing fonder feelings towards the other man either. But this... went too far. And for what? Just so the Lan Sect would cast him out? But he was a criminal in the Wen Sect as well. What was Wen Chao thinking? If he couldn’t have Lan SiZhui, nobody could?

“Shameless!” Jin Ling yelled, jostling Lan SiZhui out of his own thoughts, stepping forward. Lan SiZhui felt like he was watching this through someone else’s eyes. He’d never experienced *Empathy*, but he thought it might be like this. “How thick is your face to lie like so?!”



“Don’t believe me?” Wen Chao chuckled, then pulled something from his sleeve. Then he tossed it down and one of the Wen soldiers caught it, coming between the two armies with it, then tossing it to them. Nie MingJue caught it. It was a scroll. As he rolled it out, it revealed a map with the route that led safely off Wuye. “Who else would be able to paint such an accurate picture if not this person?”

“You want to present this as proof?!” Jin Ling laughed loudly. “Anyone could’ve drawn this! How do we know it’s not something you stole from Cloud Recesses while your vile Sect invaded it?”

“Just ask Sect Leader Lan, how many maps exist of the mountains?” Wen Chao shook his head. Lan XiChen swallowed and at Nie MingJue’s questioning look, he closed his eyes as if it pained him and shook his head.

“Who are you talking about? Won’t you give us a name?” One of the disciples behind Lan SiZhui asked. Wen Chao’s smile stretched wide. By now, some of those who knew these series of events must’ve put the picture together, but many still didn’t know.

“He is, of course, my cousin.” Wen Chao drawled. “He was stolen away from our Sect by the Lan, but his blood will always remain our own. I also heard he finally earned a respectable title. Congratulations! Bravo! The Wen Sect is most proud of you, ChunYu-Jun.”

There was a moment of silence following his words. Some people behind Lan SiZhui began whispering to each other. Nie MingJue grunted, then turned to Lan XiChen.

“What’s this?” He hissed to the other, but before Lan XiChen could answer, Jin Ling huffed, annoyed, and stepped forward, taking action.

“You expect us to believe any of this? It’s all lies!” Jin Ling shook his head and tore the scroll from Nie MingJue’s hands. “I know who drew this and it was definitely not Lan SiZhui!” He raised and shook the paper.

“Who else could’ve done it?” Wen Chao leaned forward, raising curious eyebrows. “Think about this carefully.” He said a bit quieter, with an underlying threat in his tone. Jin Ling’s jaw twitched.

“How about a treacherous spy?” Jin Ling asked. “How about two?”

“And Young Master Jin, how would you know who those spies are?” Wen Chao grinned, clearly delighting in the taunts. Lan SiZhui’s eyebrows furrowed. It was as if Wen Chao knew that Jin Ling’s knowledge, at this time, would look utterly ridiculous to claim. Lan SiZhui didn’t know who the second spy Jin Ling referred to was, but as of now, Meng Yao wasn’t a known spy, so why would Jin Ling know? Also, Meng Yao used to be Nie MingJue’s protégé, who would believe he betrayed them?

Jin Ling seemed to think the same thing through, then raised his head, a determined look entering his eyes. He’d made up his mind. “There’s a person I know who has no trouble betraying those who trust him the most. I also know for a fact that this person is working for your father in this very moment as well.”

“Don’t leave us in the dark, then. Please, tell us, who is this person?” Wen Chao gestured him to keep going.

Jin Ling gritted his teeth, glancing over at Lan SiZhui, then said:

“Meng Yao.” The two syllables came out with a pause in between them for emphasis’ sake. He then turned back to Wen Chao and threw the scroll on the ground. “I’m not saying this because he is my longtime friend, but because I’ve spent half these events by his side, as did many of you!” Jin Ling turned to the four Sect’s army. “Lan SiZhui is definitely not the enemy.”

As he talked, several people in the army were murmuring to each other, even more were making offended noises. Lan SiZhui didn’t look at them, as to not see their expressions, but he could imagine it. However, it was better this way, for Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened when he noticed movement behind Jin Ling. This slightly cleared his head and he shook off the fog that had settled over his brain, just to discover a splitting headache. Seeing what the Wen Sect was prepared to do, he ignored the pain to get his numb limbs moving.

“Jin Ling!” He called out, leaping up and calling forth Hudie. Without thinking he summoned the first notes that came to mind, and before the arrow could touch Jin Ling’s back, it stopped in the air, ink-like fog of resentful energy curling around it. Everyone hushed and the arrow dropped. Jin Ling looked up at him with wide eyes. On the steps, Wen Chao let out a sharp, loud laugh.

“Good, very good! Lan SiZhui, you definitely caught that! If you needed proof, here is your proof!” He said, pointing at Lan SiZhui. “Who else could control resentful energy like so, if not someone in possession of a Yin Iron shard?! Who would be able to summon the shadows so, who didn’t have Wen RuoHan, his uncle’s talent for the wicked tricks?! Hahaha!” He threw his head back as he laughed. Everyone else was silent.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, Lan SiZhui. You’ve truly deceived them. Look at their faces. How realization draws on them. How they’re connecting all the dots. You’ve been acting so strange since you’ve arrived to the Cloud Recesses. Nobody thought of you as the spy, because you’re soft spoken and kind. But born a Wen, always a Wen. Isn’t that right?” He smirked. While he spoke, Lan SiZhui slowly returned to the ground beside Jin Ling between the two armies. He didn’t look behind him, unable to face the four Sects. He glared at Wen Chao.

“No.” Lan XiChen said, breathing heavy, stepping forward. “Wen Chao. You’re shameless to lie so blatantly into our faces, but we can all see what you’re doing.”

“Do we?” Nie MingJue narrowed his eyes at Lan XiChen. “XiChen, you have to admit, everything he said makes sense. You yourself said Lan SiZhui is a loyal man. Does this loyalty exist towards his adoptive family, or towards his birth family?”

“MingJue, can’t you see?” Lan XiChen turned to him, then looked over at his brother, at the Jiang brothers and the rest of the army. “Wen Chao is trying to create distrust. He knows Lan SiZhui’s cultivation is the only way we can counter the Yin Iron’s power. He is disrupting us on purpose. We must not fall into his trap. We must not believe his lies.”

“But how can Lan SiZhui control resentful energy if not with the Yin Iron?” Jin ZiXuan frowned, also stepping forward. “Sect Leader Lan.” He said, but from the corner of his eye, he was looking at Wen Chao. “Wen Chao did countless evil, but our families had always been close, and because of that, I know him some. He is not honorable but he is a man of his word.”

“Sect Leader Lan is right.” Wei WuXian stepped up as well, Jiang Cheng following him with an annoyed expression. “Wen Chao is trying to cause chaos. Even if some of his words are true, and his logic makes sense, I don’t believe that Lan SiZhui is evil like this. We shouldn’t fall for Wen Chao’s tricks.”

“Then who drew the map?” Nie MingJue asked. “Meng Yao is in Koi Tower. I sent him there myself. Even though we had a fallout, I trust him that he wouldn’t turn his back on us. On me. I don’t know where Jin Ling got this idea from but based on this, anyone could’ve drawn the map.”

“There are only a handful of people who would do it actually.” Jin Ling said as he stepped closer to them, leaving Lan SiZhui’s side. “I know how Meng Yao did it, but you wouldn’t believe me.” Here, his gaze briefly flashed towards the city beyond Nightless City’s gates. Lan SiZhui knew what he referred to, though he didn’t understand. Su She was not yet working for Jin GuangYao at this time, nor did he ever work for the Wen. Though it was true that the only person they knew who could’ve drawn the map and was their enemy in the future was Su She, Lan SiZhui didn’t think his hand was in this as well. “I won’t say it, but I can assure you that the person behind it is definitely the one I’m accusing.” Jin Ling stated confidently. Lan SiZhui had his doubts and he suspected Jin Ling also was just guessing and trying to create distrust towards Jin GuangYao than actually accusing him. His tight grip on his bow gave away Jin Ling’s anxiety.

“MouShi. I don’t know why you’re so dead set on this person you don’t even know, but I can assure you, Meng Yao is not working with the Wen. Even if he figured out the paths of the mountains, he has no connection to the Wen at all.” Nie MingJue denied, shaking his head, glaring firmly at Jin Ling. “He is in Koi Tower. He has nothing to do with this.”

“Except that he’s here.” Jin Ling leveled him with a look and Nie MingJue scoffed at him.

“Don’t you start lying as well.”

“MingJue.” Lan XiChen said, looking up at Nie MingJue. There was a pause when the Nie Sect Leader seemed confused, then frowned.

“XiChen.”

“Meng Yao is the one who gave me that map of Qishan and Nightless city.” He said quietly.

“You—!” Nie MingJue’s eyes were wide as he stared at Lan XiChen. “H-how? I’ve sent him to the Koi Tower!” He shouted, though he held his voice down as to not have other people hear his words.

“When I met him, me and Lan JingYi were hiding in a village near Qishan. We were plotting the war. Meng Yao appeared and he wanted to help us. He offered to come and spy for us here. Nobody would’ve guessed he secretly worked for me.” Lan XiChen shook his head. “But I’ve—” He glanced up and met Lan JingYi’s eyes with an understanding and sad gaze of his own. “I’ve received a warning not to trust him. I didn’t know why I shouldn’t, but perhaps, this was the reason.”

“XiChen, why—” Nie MingJue breathed heavily, but before he could finish, Jin Ling cut him off.

“Does it matter now? Clearly, he’s the one working for both sides, not Lan SiZhui. He would never do that.”

“Except, it does make a hell lot of sense.” Jiang Cheng told him with a heated gaze. “I’m not saying Wen Chao is right, but someone is definitely lying, and without proper proof, how can we decide who is the one?”

“This display with the resentful energy...” Nie MingJue looked over, eyes narrowed at Lan SiZhui.

“It’s musical cultivation.” Lan JingYi said, shaking his head and stepping closer also. “It’s—” He cut himself off, looking towards Lan XiChen, who seemed to understand and took over.

“As you know, the Lan Sect invented the Qin language. But there exists an older version, the first one created. It is not as defined as the one we use today. It is not as safe to use either, so we’ve locked most of these scores away in the Forbidden Room. If Lan SiZhui studied those texts, he could’ve invented an entirely new use for Qin language.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded. “Lan SiZhui also said this is his method.”

“I now wonder what’s going on in your Sect, XiChen.” Nie MingJue glared at him. “Can just anyone walk into this Forbidden Room of yours? If this old Qin language is so powerful as you say, that’s more the reason not to trust Lan SiZhui!”

“Enough!” Wen Chao drawled loudly, and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw him sitting on the steps as he often did during the indoctrination, legs spread, leaning back, chewing his fingernails then spitting them out. “Are we going to fight or what? We’re not on a discussion conference.”

“Alright.” Wei WuXian said. “I say, for now let us forget about this and fight.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi agreed.

“If you’re lying and Lan SiZhui turns on us, XiChen...” Nie MingJue told him quietly, stepping towards him. Lan XiChen shook his head, then turned to face the Wen army, as did the rest.

“Well then, Young Master Wen, let us fight.” He said grimly, pulling out Shuoyue, the blade reflecting the gloomy sky coldly. The drums sounded up and Wen Chao smirked, saying

something to Wen ZhuLiu before he turned and headed up the stairs.

“No way is he escaping this easy.” Jin Ling grumbled by Lan SiZhui’s side, and he nodded, exchanging a look with Jin Ling. Jin Ling picked out three arrows from his quiver and Lan SiZhui called forth Yingjiu, heading straight towards Wen Chao’s back. For once, he understood the hunger for revenge. Jin Ling’s arrows flew by him in quick sequence, but before they could reach Wen Chao, Wen ZhuLiu got in the way, cutting up the arrows. Him and Lan SiZhui met at the bottom of the steps, behind them Wen soldiers engaging in battle with the four Sects’ armies.

Lan SiZhui took Yingjiu in his hand and charged at Wen ZhuLiu, who expertly evaded his attack. Lan SiZhui turned, just in time to see Wen ZhuLiu’s swipe and get out of the way. They sparred, and this time Wen ZhuLiu didn’t hold back. Lan SiZhui was frustrated. Even when Wen ZhuLiu held back, he was a good swordsman, definitely above Lan SiZhui, who, for all his power, was just a kid. He blocked more than attacked, and even so, he received countless cuts. He needed a leverage.

He never held two weapons at once, but he always had Feixu on his back since he’s reclaimed Yingjiu. Now, he pulled the sword free, somewhat clumsy with his left hand, but thankfully, Lan teachings made it mandatory to use both hands to learn how to write and fight. He was definitely weaker on his left side but having two weapons gave him some advantage. He went on the offensive.

They sparred, finding themselves more matched than before. “You’ve improved.” Wen ZhuLiu said as they crossed swords, Lan SiZhui blocking his attack with two of his.

“Or sir had become weaker during his stay at Cloud Recesses.” Lan SiZhui said. He didn’t know where he got the courage from to taunt Wen ZhuLiu like this, but something flashed in the other’s eyes that wasn’t anger.

“Perhaps.” He said courtly. They pushed away from each other, Wen ZhuLiu’s spiritual power giving Lan SiZhui a bit more push. He had to steady himself, which gave Wen ZhuLiu a fraction of advantage against him, and he landed a blow, cutting Lan SiZhui’s left arm, just under the wrist. Feixu fell to the ground. Lan SiZhui repressed a cry and backed away a little. Thankfully, Wen ZhuLiu didn’t cut the tendon in his wrist, so he could still use his hand, it was only because of momentarily shock that he dropped his sword. He had a feeling Wen ZhuLiu was going easy on him and didn’t understand.

“We’re not equals.” Wen ZhuLiu said, sensing his confusion.

“But why?” Lan SiZhui frowned, holding his wrist. The bleeding wasn’t severe, just bothersome at most. “I have the intention to kill you here today.”

“And I’m telling you, you don’t have the means to do that.” Wen ZhuLiu said calmly. “Why shouldn’t I enjoy this?” Wen ZhuLiu was enjoying the fight? Lan SiZhui searched his face, but didn’t see sign of it. Before he could say anything, Wen ZhuLiu suddenly leaned back, an arrow flying past right in front of his nose, bouncing off the stone of the stairs with a hollow sound. Lan SiZhui looked over and saw Jin Ling’s annoyed expression looking back.

“Stop chatting up the enemy all the time, Lan SiZhui!” Jin Ling called over. “Seriously, what’s wrong with you?!”

“Even if the both of you attack me, you won’t be able to best me.” Wen ZhuLiu said.

“But we can try!” Jin Ling drew another arrow, but it was dodged with Wen ZhuLiu’s scabbard. He didn’t wait for the next arrow, turning to attack Jin Ling. Lan SiZhui was alarmed and leapt after him, Yingjiu extended in front of him. Before he could stab Wen ZhuLiu’s back though, the other man suddenly disappeared. Lan SiZhui turned harshly to avoid embedding his sword in Jin Ling’s chest. His mistake was this, because in the next moment his hair was grabbed and he was pulled back, a hand closing around the back of his neck, fingers pressing into the side of his throat. Lan SiZhui yelped and Jin Ling fired an arrow. Before it could hit Wen ZhuLiu behind Lan SiZhui, he let go and leapt away. Lan SiZhui dodged Jin Ling’s arrow at the last moment.

“Stop!” Lan SiZhui told Jin Ling, panting as they both faced Wen ZhuLiu.

“You’re so arrogant, yet you’re just a coward who hides behind his wicked tricks.” Jin Ling fumed towards Wen ZhuLiu. The other’s eyebrow twitched. “Wen ZhuLiu, I hold a personal grudge against you, so we will definitely kill you today!” Lan SiZhui had no idea what personal grudge Jin Ling had against Wen ZhuLiu, but it was definitely not the time to inquire.

“We seem to be at a standstill.” Wen ZhuLiu said calmly. Before the two of them could answer, he ducked just in time for Lan JingYi’s sword to miss. Lan SiZhui leapt into action right away, but Wen ZhuLiu was faster, dodging both their attempts at attacking him.

“SiZhui.” Jin Ling called out, and Lan SiZhui stepped out of his line of sight as another arrow flew past him and aimed at Wen ZhuLiu. The other dodged it, but he mustn’t have noticed Jin Ling moving and another arrow from a completely different direction hit him in the shoulder. Wen ZhuLiu grunted and backed away. “SiZhui, go after Wen Chao. We’ve got this.” Jin Ling said.

“What about Jin ZiXuan?” He asked, side-eying the battlefield.

“I’m saying it’s fine, just fucking go already.” Jin Ling grumbled at him through clenched teeth as he shot out another arrow. Lan SiZhui nodded to the both of them, and just as Lan JingYi moved in to attack, he leapt over the three of them towards the Scorching Sun Palace.

Only he didn’t get far before a hand grabbed his ankle and yanked him down hard. Lan SiZhui bit his tongue as his chin collided with the stone of the steps leading up. Wen ZhuLiu dodged another attack by also leaping upwards, landing above the three of them on the steps. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling arrived at Lan SiZhui’s side and helped him up. Lan SiZhui wiped the blood from his chin.

“The three of you work well together, but you’re still young. You are not my match, even together like this.” Wen ZhuLiu said. Jin Ling glared at him.

“Why are you talking? Aren’t you supposed to just shut up and do as Wen Chao says? Be a good dog and shut the fuck up already.”

Wen ZhuLiu’s eyes narrowed.

“If you wish. Then it is my turn.” He said, then advanced on the three of them, his sword extended in front of him. The three had no choice but to leap in different directions. Wen ZhuLiu ignored where Lan JingYi and Jin Ling went and turned to chase Lan SiZhui. As the others attacked from behind, he kept dodging their advances without looking, pressing down on Lan SiZhui instead, forcing him on the defensive.

As Lan JingYi arrived next to them to help out, for a little while he fought both Lan, who tried their best to attack the same target without going against each other. However, after a while Wen ZhuLiu began to tire a bit and as Lan JingYi’s sword nicked the skin of his arm, he huffed, annoyed. The next moment he turned and grabbed Lan JingYi’s arm mid-swipe.

While he was distracted, Lan SiZhui charged at him, but before he could cut Wen ZhuLiu, the other side-stepped, then stepped back into Lan SiZhui’s path. Unfortunately, Lan SiZhui already took a few steps towards him. The next thing he knew Wen ZhuLiu hit him with his hand square in the chest and he stumbled back. Wen ZhuLiu didn’t hit him hard, but it was just enough for him to move. He turned and with his other hand, he grabbed Lan JingYi by the throat.

Everything froze. Jin Ling had an arrow notched, aimed at him, but Lan JingYi was in his line of sight.

“Let him go.” Lan SiZhui demanded as he saw Lan JingYi struggle to breath and sweat gathered on his forehead, clawing at Wen ZhuLiu’s arm. He’d dropped his sword at one point.

“His Core.” Wen ZhuLiu said slowly, his eyes distracted, but his posture was tense and ready to move at any second. “It’s also like yours. Cannot be crushed.” Lan SiZhui was alarmed that Wen ZhuLiu even tried, in order to know this. Now Lan JingYi’s pained expression was seen in a different light.

“Let him go then. Fight fair.” Lan SiZhui demanded. Wen ZhuLiu cocked an eyebrow and then hit Lan JingYi square in the chest, sending him flying into Jin Ling. As the other boy fell with Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui watched, horrified as his head hit the ground. Jin Ling hissed sharply, then his muscles relaxed and he passed out.

Lan SiZhui didn’t have time to worry though, for Wen ZhuLiu attacked him again next.

It was painfully obvious that they weren’t matched. Lan SiZhui knew he was weaker than Wen ZhuLiu and the Core-Melting Hand also knew this, but it never became as apparent as it was in this moment, as Lan SiZhui endured his attacks one-on-one, injured, with only his sword to protect him.

“If you give up, I won’t be forced to kill you.” Wen ZhuLiu said.

“I have no intention to give up.” Lan SiZhui gritted his teeth, stepping back. During their battle, he certainly received the more wounds of the two of them and he was tired, while Wen ZhuLiu still had the arrow sticking out from his shoulder and his gaze was calm, collected.

“I don’t understand you, Lan SiZhui.” Wen ZhuLiu said, frowning at him. “This is your family. How can you turn your back on them?” He gestured at the battlefield. They stood where the Wen army previously had been, which meant all around them mostly Wen soldiers were fighting, for they were technically behind the Wen army now.

“My family is there.” He gestured at where Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were still lying on top of each other, passed out.

“You are not loyal to your blood.” Wen ZhuLiu glared at him and Lan SiZhui huffed.

“There’s more to family than blood. Aren’t you also serving someone you’re not related to? I’m also serving my benefactor. It is the Lan Sect.”

“I was saved by His Excellency.”

“As was I by the Lan.”

“They stole you away.”

“They saved me from certain death.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “They gave me a name that will last me my life. Your name will last you until the Wen Sect falls, then your name will be a shame to wear.”

“Honor cannot be taken away.”

“No.” Lan SiZhui hummed. “But it can be given away, as you gave up yours for revenge. Sir, you’re trying to see our similarities, and I admit, at first, I thought we had many. But as time goes on, I have to realize we’re nothing alike. I would never hand myself over as you did to Wen RuoHan, just for the power to torture people.”

“Then perhaps, you misjudged me.” Wen ZhuLiu nodded. “Your words resemble those of the Four Sects’ when my family was slaughtered and they did nothing. They also pretended to be righteous and upright, but in their hearts, they were just as cruel as you think I am now. You say you wouldn’t give your honor away for revenge, for powers of torture, yet you emerged from the Burial Mounds commanding the most terrifying force on this world. We remain the same, but there is indeed a difference between us. I believed that one day we might stand face-to-face like this as equals. I was wrong.”

He looked down at his gloved hand. “The difference between us will always be present. I looked to you as a younger brother, for you remind me of myself when I was also younger. Let me tell you one thing. A request. Inevitably the world will turn against you, because they will be afraid of your abilities. Your friends and family will look at you as if you’re a monster. When this happens, I want you to remember this moment, this conversation, the things you said and the things I said.”



With this, he moved, so fast Lan SiZhui could almost didn't see his movements. He saw Wen ZhuLiu raise his sword, so he lifted his own to block the attack. Only he failed to notice Wen ZhuLiu's free hand reaching down and a moment later, he felt white-hot pain in his abdomen. He blinked at Wen ZhuLiu, who looked back at him. The pain was horrible, burning from the inside out like someone lit a star in Lan SiZhui's belly. Lan SiZhui coughed, blood splattering onto his opponent's face and their swords.

"The Western tribes used this as a torture method. They would manipulate the Golden Core to drain or overcharge at their will. Overcharging causes it to burn out, destroying the meridians. The Golden Core would 'melt' and the cultivator would receive internal injuries so severe he would eventually die. Your Core is strong and for some reason, resistant towards this overcharge, which means it would take a lot of effort to melt your Core. I cannot melt it. But I don't need to melt your Core in order to prevent you from using your spiritual powers forever. Melting one's Core is easier than you'd think. But if you want to completely destroy a person's ability to cultivate, the straightforward way to do it is to crush his meridians."

His hand twisted and Lan SiZhui felt an even greater pain than before. For a moment, his knees buckled and he almost fell down. If he wasn't afraid he would vomit blood the moment he opened his mouth, he would've screamed. Wen ZhuLiu kept talking.

"The last time I damaged your Core, you turned to demonic cultivation. Because you repaired the damage, not many saw you use this method. If you are unable to repair your spiritual powers, your only option will be to use demonic energy to fight from now on. You won't be able to wield your sword. The world will turn against you and you will see that after all, you and I are not that different from each other."

Lan SiZhui couldn't answer, his mouth filling with blood, his eyes with tears. He tried to talk, but only blood dripped from his lips. Before he could say anything else, however, Wen ZhuLiu's eyes widened and he relaxed his hold on Lan SiZhui. They swayed together. Lan SiZhui spat out the blood to the side. He blinked, not understanding what was happening.

"SiZhui, catch!" He heard Jin Ling's voice and instinctively when something flew towards him, he caught it with his free hand. Feeling Feixu's familiar weight in his hand, he did the only thing he could think of and spun the sword so its point was pointing at the sky, then with all his remaining energy, he stabbed upwards.

Wen ZhuLiu's eyes were wide as he stepped back, his sword falling to the ground, but not before getting caught in Feixu in between their bodies where it was embedded into his chest, stabbed through the side from low, so the tip of the sword penetrated the heart. Lan SiZhui tried to keep breathing as he pulled Feixu out, letting Wen ZhuLiu fall to the ground. He tried standing for a moment, but the pain in his lower abdomen was too sharp and he fell to his knees, vomiting more blood.

He looked up, and saw Wen ZhuLiu glaring at the sky, breathing sluggish, sounding like his lungs were filled with blood. His left hand was holding the puncture wound, but his right kept curling and uncurling, as if his hand was looking for something. Lan SiZhui's gaze caught on Wen ZhuLiu's sword, and slowly, he pushed himself up by Yingjiu. The pain at least lessened. He stumbled over and picked up the sword, kneeling by Wen ZhuLiu's side. He placed the sword in his hand, briefly wondering how did he get it back from the Jiang Sect,

but he quickly shook the thought off and curled Wen ZhuLiu's hand so it rested, with his sword, on his chest.

There were tears running down Wen ZhuLiu's face as he gasped for air, but blood bubbled up in his mouth. Lan SiZhui swallowed thickly, just imagining the sensation making him short of breath, or maybe that was the pain. He leaned down and whispered in Wen ZhuLiu's ear. *Thank you. I'm sorry.* The other man's gaze flickered to his, his eyes widening momentarily, then he twitched one more time and life left his eyes.

Everything was quiet for a moment, the sounds of the battle just a few meters away becoming white noise in Lan SiZhui's ears. He stared at Wen ZhuLiu's corpse. He could hardly understand what he was seeing. He died. Lan SiZhui killed him.

The ground shook underneath Lan SiZhui and he put a hand down to hold himself up, but strangely, the ground felt sure and unmoving under his hand. Was it him who was shaking then? He wasn't sure. He felt like his thoughts were slow and sluggish, a fog settling over his mind like it had when Wen Chao accused him. He decided to concentrate on breathing instead, not even noticing anything around him.

"SiZhui!"

The sound was like he heard it from under the water, muffled and hazy.

"SiZhui!"

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi fell onto his knees next to him, and Lan SiZhui winced in sympathy. That must've taken off a layer of skin of Lan JingYi's knees, but he didn't seem to even notice as he took hold of Lan SiZhui's shoulders, lifting him upright, looking into his face with wide, terrified eyes. Lan SiZhui blinked, his vision clearing as he looked into his friends' eyes, and slowly, all sensations came back to him. The yelling of soldiers as they cut down the remaining Wen, the shuffling of clothes around himself, the smell of blood strong in his nose.

And the pain.

"JingYi." Lan SiZhui panted, groaning as another wave of pain shot through him.

"He's dead." Jin Ling said from next to them where he crouched by Wen ZhuLiu's side, holding his wrist, but Wen ZhuLiu didn't let go of the sword even in death. Lan SiZhui wondered why he did that, why he gave the man his sword back to die with, but then pain distracted him.

"SiZhui, are you alright?" Lan JingYi asked, sounding wet and snotty. Lan SiZhui huffed and nodded. Though he did feel like he just woke from a particularly terrifying dream and that his head was stuffed with feathers, he realized he was not fatally wounded. He could still move and speak and think. He was alright.

"I'm alright. I'm fine." He nodded again. "JingYi, your Core..." He struggled to say, noticing for the first time the blood seeping from Lan JingYi's mouth, and the bruising already

forming on his neck.

“I’ll survive.” Lan JingYi shook his head. “It hurts like hell, but I’m fine.”

“Good, because they’re coming.” Jin Ling said, eyes fixed on the gates of Nightless City, standing slowly. “Shit. What now? You can’t fight like this.” He grumbled, as if to himself. Lan SiZhui shook his head and with Lan JingYi’s help, he stood slowly. He was trembling and he felt cold. It also felt like tiny needles traveled in his veins up and down, though the worst was his abdomen. Even though it felt like he’d been gutted, when he looked down at the hand cradling his stomach, he didn’t see blood there at all.

“Someone pick up my swords.” He requested weakly.

“Like hell you’re fighting! JingYi will take you back to camp.”

“I’m not going to fight with my swords.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I just don’t want to lose them.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but he picked both swords up. Feixu he slid back into the scabbard secured on Lan SiZhui’s back, but Yingjiu, after sheathing it, he tucked into Lan JingYi’s sash.

“Hey!” Lan JingYi complained.

“Shut up, would you rather Lan SiZhui fall over and onto it?” Jin Ling glared.

“I’m not going to—” Lan SiZhui hissed, coughing up a bit of blood. He swallowed and tried again. “I’m not going to fall over.”

“You look like you will the moment a breeze comes.” Jin Ling informed him.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui clicked his tongue. He watched as the others engaged in a fight with the puppets, and watched as the Wen soldiers between them and the four Sects’ army rose. “Shit.” The curse slipped out before Lan SiZhui could stop it.

“Wen ZhuLiu and his stupid moves.” Jin Ling grumbled. “I’ve used my last arrow to save you. I hope you’re grateful.” He said. Lan SiZhui looked over at Wen ZhuLiu’s corpse, finally understanding that when Wen ZhuLiu froze earlier, he was actually shot in the back by Jin Ling.

“There.” Lan JingYi said suddenly, pointing at something on the ground not far from them. It was a dead Wen soldier.

“What?” Jin Ling scowled.

“His quiver.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes and indeed, the Wen soldier had a bow and a quiver full of arrows on him. Jin Ling jogged over and started strapping it off the man, only one of the nearby soldiers who had been fighting a Jin soldier and killed him, noticed Jin Ling.

“Watch out!” Lan JingYi shouted a moment too late and Jin Ling’s shoulder got grazed by the sword before he scrambled back, pulling out Xianzi and stabbing the Wen in the chest. He

frowned at the sword, rolling his eyes before sheathing it and returning to the arrows. He got the quiver without further accidents, then hurried back to them.

“JingYi, stay with him and don’t let him do something stupid.” Jin Ling said. “I’m going back to fighting. Don’t do anything stupid.” He repeated, looking into Lan SiZhui’s eyes. Lan SiZhui made a helpless gesture and Jin Ling nodded to Lan JingYi before running away. He fought through the crowd before it swallowed him up. The next time they glimpsed at him, he was attacking one of the puppets that was about to strike down Jiang Cheng and with an inelegant swipe, severed its head, his practice sword wobbling dangerously. It wasn’t a flexible sword. If it couldn’t take the strain anymore, it would snap. Lan SiZhui gritted his teeth, straightening up, pushing Lan JingYi’s hand away.

“Help him.”

“But—”

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui looked over and gave him a significant look. “I can sit here on my own, I don’t need you to hold me up.” He nodded to him. “Go. Please, trust me.”

“Last time you sent me away, I didn’t see you for half a year.”

“Last time you knew you won’t see me for months. Now, you know you need to only look over to see me.” Lan JingYi looked at him for a long time, then turned to see Jin Ling shooting an arrow onto a puppet, but another approached him from the side and he had to kick it away to reload.

“But you’ll stay here.” Lan JingYi told him sternly after seeing that.

“Right here. Maybe a little higher so they can’t reach me?” He smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. Lan JingYi still nodded and then ran off. Lan SiZhui worried about his injuries, but it seemed Wen ZhuLiu didn’t hurt him too badly, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to support Lan SiZhui. They could not afford to skip the fight now, so Lan SiZhui didn’t have a choice but to send him off. All he could do is to help as he could.

Lan SiZhui sighed, gritting his teeth against the pain to stay upright. He knew his limits and knew he wouldn’t be of any use in a fight like this. Thankfully, there was still something he could do. Glancing over at the top of the stairs, he gathered all his strength and leapt up, almost crashing into the ground in front of the doors leading into the Scorching Sun Palace. They were firmly shut, but that was alright. He let himself rest for a moment, then sat and pulled out Hudie. He closed his eyes and despite the nausea from the pain, he concentrated on his task, willing his hands to stop shaking.

He recalled every bit of knowledge he’d gathered from his experiments in the Burial Mounds and then *played*. He felt resentful energy gather around himself, knew what he was doing, but this was the only way, since he didn’t have the Stygian Tiger Amulet. He let the shadows come. But before he could let them inside himself and gather the resentful energy like that, a soft breeze brushed his cheek and a new sound penetrated through the noise of the battlefield and Lan SiZhui’s play.

He opened his eyes, first not seeing anything but the resentful energy around him. The sound of the flute followed his own lead, as if copying Lan SiZhui's scores. Sometimes the transitions were rough, as the person playing didn't anticipate the next note. He wasn't completely inexperienced though, more so. His play was so excellent, Lan SiZhui only heard such play only once. He looked up, eyes wide.

"Keep playing. I'll help." Wei WuXian told him, then positioned his flute back to his mouth. Lan SiZhui needed a moment to collect himself, to realize this was not the time to question Wei WuXian, but at the same time, shocked to see a flute in his hand in this life. This wasn't supposed to happen this time. Lan SiZhui had saved him, hadn't he?

This wasn't the time. Lan SiZhui gritted his teeth and began playing again, looking over at Wei WuXian, who was watching his fingers on the guqin. "How do you know the old Qin language?" There was no way he met the old Qin language. The only time he studied it was in the future, when he figured out Su She's use of it during the second siege of the Burial Mounds. In this life, when did he have the opportunity? Until Lan SiZhui invented this use, there wasn't even—!

Oh.

Of course.

After he'd come back from the Burial Mounds and ran into Wei WuXian, they spent several days together in the woods. Lan SiZhui suspected Wei WuXian had examined him while he was asleep and he also knew he searched him and his clothes. Back then, he took his notes of the Qin language with him, but after those days, he hadn't even thought about them, hadn't even questioned where they had gone once he reunited with his family. He didn't even realize back then, that they were gone.

Lan SiZhui squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to curl up in pain and in realization. He'd been so careless! He didn't even realize the notes were gone. How could he? But this wasn't the time. Lan SiZhui opened his eyes and took a deep breath, reorienting himself.

Even though it was obvious Wei WuXian wasn't an expert at the old Qin language, he was an expert at playing the flute. Lan SiZhui didn't know when he learned it. Perhaps he already knew how to, after all, he was the head disciple of Lotus Pier, and also a master in the six arts. Some of his notes even differed from Lan SiZhui's, borderline the same notes he'd heard in Guanyin temple. Even though Wei WuXian didn't fall into the Burial Mounds in this life, he was still incredibly intelligent and figured out how to control resentful energy on his own as well as he obviously studied Lan SiZhui's own notes and integrated them into his own arsenal. His song was a mashup of the two methods, combining them expertly, making his play even stronger.

His notes from the Burial Mounds were mostly organized. He'd made sure to scribble down the translation of the notes and he even created songs to use. He never named them. That would've come handy now.

"Young Master Wei, play the one that starts with 'There will be light'." Wei WuXian's eyes widened and he nodded, turning towards the battlefield, the notes falling from his flute with

practiced ease. Lan SiZhui knew while Wei WuXian wasn't the most hard-working person, he was very motivated to learn about things he was interested in. If Lan SiZhui's notes interested him enough, he would know them by heart by now. This particular was a song good for chasing resentful energy away from himself. Wei WuXian must've realized why he needed to play it, because he soon began mixing it with his own notes, making the puppets freeze.

Lan SiZhui in contrast played another song, so while Wei WuXian was busy directing the puppets, Lan SiZhui worked on suppressing the Yin Iron's control on them. While the two of them worked, concentrating on their tasks, suddenly something flew over Lan SiZhui's head, and a body hit the ground behind them. Lan SiZhui spun around while standing, glaring at the guard who was trying to sneak up on them, the other one already lying dead on the ground, an arrow sticking out of his neck. Another arrow flew past Lan SiZhui, the breeze lifting his hair a bit, and the second guard fell on his knees, clutching his neck with the arrow, then fell face-first onto the ground.

"You have powerful friends, Lan SiZhui." Came from the darkness behind the doors of the Palace that was now wide open.

"Wen Chao." Lan SiZhui glared into the darkness, letting his well-repressed hatred show on his face for once. "What was the purpose of those lies you told?!"

"I said no lies." Wen Chao smirked. "The truth is, Lan SiZhui, there's so much you don't understand. I'm actually just trying to help you. You see, you came here to stop the war, to save lives. Why does it matter whose side are you on as long as you can save people? Don't blame me for using this opportunity to move my own plans forward."

"But what's your goal?" Lan SiZhui frowned, shaking his head. "You're right, there are things I don't understand. I don't understand you. All this time you've been purposefully trying to make my people distrust me. With some of them it worked, on others it did not. But why? I've barely turned twenty and there are more knowledgeable people in my generation, better fighters even. I'm just a nobody."

"Nobody is just a nobody. Especially one of our own. Didn't I tell you, Lan SiZhui? One day you will realize you're on the wrong side of history and when that happens I'll be waiting for you at the gates of Nightless City. I kept my promise, didn't I? Here we are." He paused and stepped forward, still out of Jin Ling's range, but more visible. "There are things I'm not classified to talk about just yet. A little later, perhaps." He smiled, flicked his sleeves and began pacing. "I admit some of my actions were... a little rash." He inclined his head, as if in apology. "But they've all been for one purpose in mind. To make you see the true righteousness of your beloved Sects."

"You ask why I'm trying to drive a wedge between you and the four Sects. I ask you if you see their true nature yet. How many people have to curse your birthname before you realize? They didn't trust you from the beginning. Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi find you weird and shady. Madam Yu hates you. You might've earned Lan XiChen's trust, but see how they turned to him the moment he defended you. Are you so blind?"

“What have the Wen Sect done to deserve the treatment we’ve got? We went to attend the GusuLan guest lectures and your own cousin was watched with suspicion and distain. How did she deserve that? We’ve visited Cloud Recesses to ask them about the Yin Iron and the next thing we know the Lan Sect is killing our people. Did we have a choice other than killing them in turn?

“We’re not weak like you. We won’t take so many offenses before we retaliate. You hate what had happened to Lotus Pier, wasn’t that also just an answer to the violence we had to endure from Wei WuXian? We’ve experienced this in history, how easy the cultivation world turns against one of their own, just because they dislike it if they do something they don’t approve of. The Wen Sect won’t sit idle and wait for doom to come, so we prepared and took the initiative instead. Unlike you, we were proactive.

“You want to know why am I saying the things I am? It’s to make you see as well, because as one of our own, you deserve to see their deception and fickle loyalty more than any of us. You were raised in the snake’s nest. As your cousin, should I stand to watch them crusade against you as well? I’d rather hurt you to make you see them for what they are. That’s how much the Wen Sect cares about you.”

There was a long pause, then Wei WuXian scoffed. “Wen Chao, I’ve always knew you were vile, but I never realized you were so delusional and crazy. It was my mistake. Forgive me.” He bowed mockingly.

Wen Chao snorted. “Look down.” He said, nodding towards the battlefield. Lan SiZhui glared at him. “Come on. If I wanted to kill you, I’d have done so already. Look down.”

Lan SiZhui slowly turned, his eyes meeting Wei WuXian’s. He had Suibian in his hand, but before he could draw it, Wen Chao clicked his tongue.

“I have four archers behind me, ready to shoot you two down if you try anything. Look. Down.”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and he turned towards the battlefield. Now that they both stopped playing, the puppets started attacking the Sects again, but some were still looking towards them, Jin Ling near the stairs, an arrow notched. Lan SiZhui shook his head subtly, and Jin Ling made an annoyed expression, then turned and shot down a puppet that was attacking Jiang Cheng.

Lan SiZhui looked over the battlefield. Lan XiChen was fighting a puppet, but Lan SiZhui couldn’t see Nie MingJue in the crowd. Lan WangJi was looking up towards them as well, brows furrowed. Lan JingYi was also still fighting, protecting an injured Nie soldier. Jin ZiXuan was also looking towards them, his expression, unlike Lan WangJi’s concerned and confused one, hard and accusing.

“The people you call friends don’t need any proof to believe you’re evil. You were born a Wen, and that is enough to them to believe you’d betray them.” Wen Chao sounded melancholic, like he truly felt sorry because of this. This sounded just like what Wen ZhuLiu told him. Lan SiZhui was annoyed and in pain.

“Young Master Wen, it is true that the dots are connecting quite nicely with your story. However, you forget that it isn’t just events in a history book you speak of, but something we’ve lived through.” Wei WuXian said, crossing his arms over his chest. “We’ve all fought by Lan SiZhui’s side. Yes, some might doubt him because of your words, but at the end of the day, they will all realize that Lan SiZhui’s character is upright and noble.”

“Will they, Wei WuXian?” Wen Chao hummed, tilting his head to the side. “Who is Lan SiZhui? Hm?”

“What do you mean?” Wei WuXian frowned, exchanging a confused glance with Lan SiZhui as they both turned back to Wen Chao.

“Who is he? Who are his parents? His adoptive fathers he speaks of so often? Why haven’t the cultivation world heard of something so scandalous as a Wen child being adopted into the Lan Sect? How about his friends? Who are they? Jin Ling has so many uncles, yet nobody had ever heard of him?” He shook his head, as if he sympathized with Wei WuXian. “You always knew something fishy was going on, Wei WuXian, yet when you have someone validating your concerns and questions, that’s when you decide to be loyal?”

“It’s true that in the beginning I often wondered about Lan SiZhui’s and his friends’ persons.” Wei WuXian nodded, speaking slowly and considerably. “And I admit some things still don’t make sense. They lie, a lot, I’ve learned. But Young Master Wen.” He looked up into Wen Chao’s eyes. “One thing I do not and would never doubt. Do you know what it is?”

“Hm?” Wen Chao tilted his head to the side, raising his eyebrows.

“Lan SiZhui and his friends are definitely not working for you, nor your father.” Wei WuXian told him with a cold smile.

“And why is that?” Wen Chao hummed.

“Because Lan SiZhui saved Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan.” Wei WuXian said easily.

“Just this?” Wen Chao snorted.

“Yes.” Wei WuXian nodded, then took a deep breath, letting it out in a huff. “Wen Chao, you’re not a dumb person, nor is Wen RuoHan. The Jiang Sect is, despite our image to the world, very strong and we fight very well. We might be laidback, but we’re not one of the five major Sects for nothing. The Lan Sect are strong but they’re mostly monks who know how to fight. The Jin Sect is pretentious and would rather enjoy their comfort, gaining their place through background work and connections.

“Truth is, the Nie and Wen Sects are the ones who can compare to the Jiang Sect the best. We gained our place and reputation through hard work, not by staying away from mortal affairs and connection. If Sect Leader Jiang would be here to hear me talk like this, he would scold me, but he is not here, so I can speak plainly.

“Wen Chao, as I said, nor you, nor your father are stupid. The biggest threat to you is the Nie and Jiang Sects. You were unable to breach the Nie Sects’ defenses, so you turned to Lotus



Pier next. I admit, we weren't as prepared for this battle as we should've been, but one thing is for sure. Even though you beat us, you didn't weaken us. Look down. You see how many of us are here, despite our losses? You cannot be as stupid as let the Jiang Sect regain its strength by keeping our seasoned and experienced Sect heads alive. You'd have done so much damage by killing Sect Leader and his Lady. Even if you didn't kill every disciple, having Jiang Cheng as our leader would've weakened us greatly.

"I love my brother, but he is controlled by his emotions and when he feels cornered, he isn't the best at making sound decisions. If you killed Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu, he would've been so grief stricken and revenge-hungry, he wouldn't have been able to lead the Sect with a stable hand. He would've marched into battle, no doubt, but once here, he would've been reckless. He would've wanted to end the Wen Sect so much, he wouldn't have worked together with the other three Sects well. His pride couldn't take it.

"So, you see, I don't believe you or your father are stupid enough to make such a strategically bad decision. By leaving Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu alive it is ensured that the Jiang Sect would come back under the stable hands of a well-trusted and seasoned leadership, one you couldn't have afforded to face in this war. We've reached Qishan barely months after the war had started. Do you think this would've happened if Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan were dead? I highly doubt it."

Wen Chao listened to all this with his eyes narrowed at Wei WuXian, his eyebrows furrowed. But once Wei WuXian was done, he chuckled. "Wei WuXian, Wei WuXian." He drew in a deep breath. "You're so smart, you think you're smarter than everyone. Alright, fine. You got me." He huffed, though he looked more amused than anything. "What are you going to do? Tell this to the Sects, make them realize? How many would believe the other demonic cultivator? Perhaps we've been too concentrated on Lan SiZhui and failed to notice you also share the same fate. It was our fault." He inclined his head.

"Wen Chao, are you trying to convince *me* now to join you?" Wei WuXian stared at Wen Chao in disbelief.

"Of course not." All amusement disappeared from Wen Chao's face. "You're not even part of the discussion, much less our plans with Lan SiZhui."

"Then stop talking about my fate." Wei WuXian threw him a flat look.

"I didn't say it for your sake. I happen to know Lan SiZhui also cares for you greatly." He paused, then smirked. "But of course, Lan SiZhui doesn't need me to point out that your fates are similar."

Lan SiZhui frowned.

"What do you mean?" Wei WuXian asked.

"It's none of your business, Wei WuXian. Didn't I tell you? You're not even part of the discussion."

“You keep trying to convince me that you don’t care about me yet you keep talking about my fate. Young Master Wen, in the end, I’ll think you care about me.” Wei WuXian’s usual taunts didn’t seem to work, for Wen Chao rolled his eyes and otherwise ignored him.

“You will never understand it, Wei WuXian. Give it up. I can see it in your eyes. You’re wondering. Your smart little brain is working so hard to understand us. But there are things in the background that you know nothing about. There are secrets you’re not aware of. Lan SiZhui knows what they are, I also know what they are. But you don’t. And that...” He grinned slowly. “That annoys you so much.” He chuckled lowly, then sighed audibly. “What a pity nobody will ever tell you. You will never know for sure, what Lan SiZhui is hiding so much from you.”

“Alright.” Wei WuXian sighed. “Wen Chao, that’s enough. I clearly don’t believe you and Lan SiZhui clearly isn’t working for you. You said it yourself. Let’s just stop talking and fight, okay?”

“Heh.” Wen Chao shook his head, then turned and began walking back into the Palace. “As you wish! Lan SiZhui, once you’re done, come see me. We have a lot to talk about!” With this, he pushed open the second door, revealing rows of soldiers waiting inside. As he walked between the rows, Wen Chao called over his shoulder: “Make the right choice, Lan SiZhui! Your family will benefit from it!” He waved his hand and the soldiers from inside pushed through the door.

“Shit.” Wei WuXian hissed. “And the puppets are still there, too.” He said, glancing behind his back.

“Young Master Wei.” Lan SiZhui said as the two of them were backing away, careful not to fall down. “Let us go on the roof.” Lan SiZhui said this for multiple reasons. One of them was to avoid being pushed down the stairs, but the other, bigger reason was that like this, he was closer to the servant route Meng Yao kept clean for them to sneak in through. If the two of them could get inside somehow, they would be able to execute Lan SiZhui’s original plans.

Wei WuXian nodded to him and they leapt up onto the roof. Only when they landed, Lan SiZhui doubled over. “SiZhui!” Wei WuXian called out, alarmed and held him, so he wouldn’t fall off. Except, Lan SiZhui vomited blood again. He forgot about his injury.

“I’m alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded as he straightened up, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. It came away red.

“Can you fight at all?” Wei WuXian asked, worried.

“Even if I can’t, I can hold them back until you sneak inside.” Lan SiZhui said. “There’s a route towards the back of the Palace. Follow that path.” He pointed towards a little trail in one of the courtyards a few buildings over. “I think Sect Leader Nie is already inside.”

“SiZhui—” Wei WuXian began, but then he saw something and pushed Lan SiZhui behind him, pulling out Suibian and blocking an attack from a Wen soldier who followed them up. Lan SiZhui also pulled out Feixu and attacked one that just landed next to them. He found that despite his injury, he could move freely. Until he tried to use his internal energy to evade

an attack. Suddenly, pain exploded in his abdomen and he almost fell to his knees. Thankfully, before that, he was able to kick the soldier off the roof.

“SiZhui!” Wei WuXian caught him as he fell on his knees.

“I think I shouldn’t try to use my spiritual powers.” Lan SiZhui said as he wiped his mouth free of blood again. “Wen ZhuLiu’s attack seems to have been effective despite killing him in the process.”

“Is your Core gone?!” Wei WuXian stared at him with wide eyes. Lan SiZhui felt light-headed.

“No.” He glanced behind him when he sensed someone landing on the roof. “Go. I’ll hold them up.” Before Wei WuXian could answer, the soldier cried out and fell, clutching his chest. Lan SiZhui looked in the other direction.

“This is the hero complex I’m talking about all the time!” Jin Ling snapped as he landed on the roof. “What the hell, Lan SiZhui?! ‘Don’t do anything stupid’, is that not what I said? Or perhaps your hearing got damaged as well?!”

“Jin Ling, Jin ZiXuan—”

“Yes.” Jin Ling glared at him. “I should be looking out for him, because you were supposed to stay put and not do anything stupid. Aren’t you ashamed?!”

“Alright, stop yelling at the injured.” Came Lan JingYi’s voice from Lan SiZhui’s other side. As he looked over, he saw the other looking down at the battlefield from where he stood. There was a dark band of bruising in the shape of a hand on his neck and as he tried to wipe the blood off his chin he only managed to smear it around, but he was standing upright, holding his sword. He was pale and sweaty, but he was well enough to fight. Lan SiZhui was relieved. “What now?” He looked over at Lan SiZhui, raising his eyebrows. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I don’t know. We should either sneak in like we planned or…”

“Or?” Jin Ling prompted.

“Well, since Young Master Wei can also control the puppets, he could stay here and control them. And we just walk in.”

“Just walk in?” Jin Ling glared at him. “What, through the door, like we’re invited?”

“We are.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Wen Chao said to see him once we were done here.”

“And you listen to him?!”

“It is a chance for us to get inside. Where is Sect Leader Nie?”

“Why? I haven’t seen him for a while now. JingYi?”

“Didn’t see him.” Lan JingYi shook his head. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Then he’s probably already inside.”

“What is he doing? Is he stupid, or does he have a death wish? I thought we agreed he wouldn’t do it.” Jin Ling huffed, annoyed, then notched an arrow and shot into the crowd. Lan SiZhui didn’t see what he shot at until a red-clad body fell to the side, revealing the back of Jin ZiXuan. Jin ZiXuan spun and looked down at the body, then up at the roof before continuing to fight.

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?” Wei WuXian frowned. “I thought this was Jiang style.”

“It is.” Jin Ling told him. “My teacher was from Yunmeng. Do you want to chat or do you want to fight?” He rolled his eyes. “I’ll stay here with Wei WuXian. I can’t leave my—Jin ZiXuan like this.” He addressed the rest towards Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi.

“Isn’t it dangerous if only the two of them go?” Wei WuXian frowned.

“Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao are inside.” Lan JingYi said, sharing a look with Lan SiZhui.

“JingYi, I meant what I said.” Jin Ling said, tone warning and chiding, as if he thought Lan JingYi forgot about it. “If it really was him who got the map, we don’t know whose side he’s on.”

“I’m aware what Meng Yao is capable of.” Lan JingYi said grimly. “You needn’t to remind me.”

“Aren’t we all?” Jin Ling grumbled, then aimed carefully with his arrow, shooting down a soldier who had his sword at Jiang Cheng’s neck, ready to kill him. The arrow was faster, flying past Jiang Cheng’s face, because of the angle nicking his cheek as it embedded into the Wen soldier’s eye. Jiang Cheng made a face as he kicked the corpse away and made a rude gesture towards the rooftop before returning to the fight.

“You’re almost out of arrows.” Wei WuXian noted. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Thanks, I didn’t notice. Where’s that dumb flute of yours? Mind your own business.” He paused, then looked towards the Lan. “I’m just being paranoid, huh? It’s just talismans and a fight, huh? Turns out Wei WuXian hadn’t changed at all. He had been using demonic cultivation the whole time. Next time, don’t accuse me of not knowing my family well, because I will just humiliate you by being right.” He told them arrogantly. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“MouShi, are you going to keep bragging about being right, or should we go and save the cultivation world? We cannot do both at the same time. You talk too much.”

“You—!” He began, then just glared at Lan JingYi. “Be quick. I’m almost out of arrows.” He told Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi in the end, turning back to the battlefield. The two of them nodded and sharing a parting look with the other two, they leapt off the roof.



## Wrath III.

The first chamber they arrived to was just a greeting hall, from where Wen Chao had talked to Wei WuXian and Lan SiZhui earlier. Lan JingYi stepped forward and pushed the doors open. Last time several soldiers stood behind the door, now none did. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged a look, going to the second door. Pushing it open revealed another, more spacious greeting hall. Beyond the double door was Wen RuoHan's reception hall, probably where he was hiding.

However, in front of the heavy, wooden doors on the short steps leading up, sat Wen Chao. He was leaning back against the door, a bored expression on his face. By his side, eight guards stood, framing the whole room. As Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi entered, two of them hurried over and pulled the doors shut behind them.

"You've made it." Wen Chao smirked. Then his gaze flickered to Lan JingYi and he sighed. "Lan SiZhui, do you always have to drag others into your business?" He sounded disappointed and stood. "Don't you get it by now? You're just ensuring their deaths." When he got no answer, he looked over at Lan JingYi. "You look familiar." He thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "Ah, yes, we've met in YiLing. I have a good memory." Wen Chao smirked. "I remember how glad Lan SiZhui was to see you. You must mean a lot to him." He bowed his head, shaking it before looking up. "Lan SiZhui, I might even feel sorry for killing your friend."

"Who said you were going to kill us?" Lan JingYi crossed his arms over his chest, jutting out his chin arrogantly. The effect was slightly dimmed by the bruises around his neck. Wen Chao chuckled, looking around the room whilst nodding.

"You're surrounded." He informed them, amused.

"And?" Lan JingYi frowned, looking Wen Chao up and down. Lan SiZhui almost forgot just how arrogant Lan JingYi could be.

"I'm glad Lan SiZhui had surrounded himself with friends whose fighting spirit is so great, but I'm afraid neither of you know how to admit defeat. It's alright. I'll show you." With that, the soldiers around them attacked without warning.

Lan SiZhui ducked as one of them swiped towards him. Not having his spiritual power, he'd rather use Hudie to summon resentful energy, but they were in a relatively small space and he couldn't get away for long enough to play. He raised Feixu and blocked the next swipe with his sword, grunting as his injured arm was jostled. He kicked the soldier back, who fell back onto Lan JingYi, who fell forward, sending the soldier he was fighting into the one standing behind him.

"Hey!" Lan JingYi complained with a slightly pained grunt. After all, he was also injured.

"Sorry." Lan SiZhui panted as he dodged another attack, then swiped with his sword, successfully catching one of his two attackers in the middle.

As he backed away from a downstroke, arms wrapped around him from behind and he yelped, startled. He used his upper body strength to kick the soldier coming at him from the front, then buckled his head back, feeling something sharp and hard collecting with the back of his head, then the arms released him and he stabbed the soldier who was holding his broken nose.

Unfortunately, this left him open for attacks and in a second, there was a sword to his throat. He stepped back, hoping to be fast enough, but he collided with another body. He tensed, expecting to be grabbed again, but from the corner of his eyes, he saw white fabric. Him and Lan JingYi were both held at sword point, backs against each other in the middle of the small room. Their situation couldn't be helped.

"Bravo!" Wen Chao clapped loudly, grinning as he stepped forward. He looked around the room. "Lan SiZhui, I expected better from you, yet your friend killed more of my men than you." He hummed. "I wonder why you didn't use spiritual energy to fight. Could it be..." He stepped closer and Lan SiZhui's hand flexed on Feixu, but before he could even twitch, another soldier was there and twisted it out of his hand. Wen Chao rolled his eyes and picked up Lan SiZhui's wrist. "Ah, it's not gone. How fortunate. It would be a pity if you survived the Burial Mounds, yet just a spar with Wen ZhuLiu and he crushes your meridians."

"Now what? You'll kill us?" Lan JingYi asked, breathing raggedly.

"You're so eager to die?" Wen Chao blinked, his eyes dropping to Lan JingYi's neck for a moment, then he hummed. "Unfortunately, I cannot. But if you wish, once my father is done with the two of you, it can be arranged." He smirked.

"Why do you need your father's permission?" Lan JingYi sneered. "Even a dog has a master?" At this, Wen Chao laughed out loud.

"How spirited! I cannot wait until you face His Excellency and that sharp tongue of yours is finally removed from your mouth." He leaned into Lan JingYi's face to taunt him. Lan SiZhui reached back and caught Lan JingYi's hand, who squeezed his.

"Leave him alone." Lan SiZhui said. "It's me you want."

"It's both of you, actually." Wen Chao finally backed away, looking at Lan SiZhui with a bored expression. "Rather the three of you, but I see your little cousin isn't here with you. No matter. You're the smartest of the bunch anyways."

"Should I protest?" Lan JingYi whispered to Lan SiZhui, barely audible. Lan SiZhui didn't dignify that with an answer.

"So, it's just me you need. Leave JingYi and Jin Ling alone and take me to your father." Lan SiZhui told Wen Chao, who huffed.

"As I said, this is not up to me. You have His Excellency to answer to." He paused. "Lan SiZhui, let me ask you one more time. Are you still reluctant to join your family and fight by our side?"

“Wen Chao, I told you countless times. My family is the Lan.”

“So, you keep being stubborn.” Wen Chao sighed. “What a pity. I’ve done all I could, yet you still refuse to obey.” He paused again. “So be it! Then I’ll take you to father and you and him will have a nice chat. Maybe by the end of it, you will also see that the Wen Sect isn’t as evil as you make us out to be. After all, we are the Sect whose name you were born with. We’re not that different, you and I.”

“Young Master Wen, as repulsive as it is to admit, I have more common with Wen ZhuLiu than you. Please, don’t mention us in the same sentence again.” Lan SiZhui said coldly. Wen Chao chuckled.

“I never understood why that dog was so fascinated with you. When I questioned him why he didn’t crush your Core in Lotus Pier, he came up with such a flimsy excuse, then later in YiLing as well. Isn’t it strange? Core-Melting Hand had been my father’s assassin for such a long time. Yet he still believed in values he had no use for. My father liked him a lot, I didn’t. Actually, I should be thanking you for killing him. You really showed your true colors.”

“Young Master Wen, is your plan to talk us to sleep?” Lan JingYi complained. “I have a headache in this place and your voice doesn’t help. Please, shut up.”

Wen Chao sneered. “I wanted to be courteous and give you time to settle your nerves. But since you insist, why don’t we go in? I’m sure my father is anxious to talk to Lan SiZhui. I told him all about you.” He smirked at Lan SiZhui, then turned towards the doors and bowed. “Father, I captured them.”

With this, the door to Wen RuoHan’s chambers creaked open. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were led forward, into the room. It was big and dark, long, expensive tapestries blocking the windows to the sides. In the middle, there was a hole in the ground, fire burning inside it. The Yin Iron shards floated above it, the heat from the fire probably aiding Wen RuoHan’s cultivation. Lan SiZhui’s mouth filled with blood as the resentful energy from the Yin Iron seeped towards them, making Lan SiZhui’s headache worse than it had been.

On this side of the hall, Nie MingJue was kneeling. As Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were led inside, he looked up and over, his expression furious but worried at the same time. On the far side of the pit, Wen RuoHan stood in front of his throne. Lan SiZhui had never seen the man, there weren’t even paintings of him. He looked like his sons, they resembled him greatly. His robes were made of expensive materials, but they were thrown carelessly onto his shoulders. His hair was also in disarray, his topknot hardly a knot anymore, several strands of hair having escaped it. His gaze was dark and cold.

He looked like an old, worn-out, tired man. Lan SiZhui didn’t expect to be as scared as he was in the presence of the Wen Sect Leader.

He reached over and as he did when they were still kids, grabbed onto Lan JingYi’s sleeve. The other didn’t seem to notice, but that was fine. Several guards stood to the sides, though some were standing between where Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were held and Nie MingJue, holding some Nie soldiers at sword point.



“A-Chao.” Lan SiZhui winced, and he was surprised by how softly Wen RuoHan spoke. “Is this him?”

“Yes, father.” Wen Chao said, and for the first time ever, Lan SiZhui didn’t hear Wen Chao boast or drawl, no arrogance in his voice whatsoever, just respect. He spoke softly as well, bowing to the Wen Sect Leader, then gestured and Lan SiZhui was pushed forward.

“Bring him over.” Wen RuoHan said and Lan SiZhui’s heart pounded as Wen Chao led Lan SiZhui, who was still held at sword point towards the middle. He looked back at Lan JingYi and saw him being forced onto his knees beside the Nie soldiers.

As he was led past Nie MingJue, their gazes met. Nie MingJue was breathing heavily, his eyes narrowed. Lan SiZhui looked down and followed Wen Chao past the firepit. There Wen Chao stopped and the soldier behind Lan SiZhui shoved him, so he fell on his knees.

Wen RuoHan looked down on him and Lan SiZhui felt his throat tighten. It was silent for a long time, then Wen RuoHan took the stairs leading up to the throne one step at a time, coming down towards the three of them.

His gaze was unwavering and cold. Despite knowing the Wen Sect used fire to escalate their cultivation, Lan SiZhui felt there was nothing warm in this man. He couldn’t imagine the courteous Sect Leader Wen ZhuLiu talked about. Actually, he could hardly think past the anxiety that gripped his throat tight.

“So, you’re the one.” Wen RuoHan said as he stopped next to Wen Chao, who was still facing the throne in a salute. “My son had told me about you. A Wen in GusuLan robes.” He said almost tenderly, but there was nothing gentle in his gaze. “Where is his sword?” He asked and quickly a soldier hurried over, presenting Feixu to him. Wen RuoHan first just looked at it, then took it and ran a finger over the flat side. As his finger came away bloody, he raised his gaze to Lan SiZhui. “A brother’s sword coated in Wen blood.” He handed the sword back.

“Father. Lan SiZhui is the one I told you about, who can control resentful energy and—” Wen Chao said, turning to him, but before he could continue, Wen RuoHan raised a hand, silencing him.

“You survived three months in the YiLing Burial Mounds?” Lan SiZhui fixed his gaze on the tips of Wen RuoHan’s boots in front of him; it was better than looking at the man.

“He did—” Wen Chao began when Lan SiZhui didn’t answer, but again, Wen RuoHan cut him off.

“I asked *him*.” He paused and stepped closer. “Well?”

“His Excellency asked you a question.” Wen Chao barked at him when he didn’t answer, and the guard behind him shoved at Lan SiZhui’s shoulder, so he fell forward onto his hands. He sat back up, but still didn’t answer. “Ch, Lan SiZhui, so arrogant.”

“A-Chao, that’s enough.” Wen RuoHan said sternly. Wen Chao glared at his father, then lowered his eyes.

“Father, I know Lan SiZhui. He is stubborn.”

“Even if he doesn’t acknowledge his family, I’m still a Sect Leader and he is a Lan. He was taught to respect his elders. Isn’t that one of the many conducts of the Lan Sect?” He raised his eyebrows at Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, refusing to answer.

Wen Chao made a gesture behind Wen RuoHan and there was a short, pained sound from behind, in a voice Lan SiZhui would recognize in a huge crowd.

“Enough, don’t hurt him!” He called out, looking back to see Lan JingYi’s arm being twisted back. Wen RuoHan gestured and the soldier let go of him.

“So, you *can* talk.” Wen RuoHan said, and Lan SiZhui turned back, still not looking up at him. “That you survived the Burial Mounds is not a small feat. Tell me, have you ever heard the name Xue ChongHai?” Wen RuoHan waited a beat, but then continued, beginning to pace back and forth in front of Lan SiZhui. “He was the one who turned the Yin Iron into a resentful tool. His theory was that if you use the Yin Iron to cultivate, you would be able to control the resentful energy even without a spiritual tool. Wen Chao tells me you’re a scholar. What do you think of that?”

Lan SiZhui debated not answering, but in the end, he decided this was a safe enough topic to engage in conversation in. It wasn’t worth hurting Lan JingYi over.

“Spiritual energy is energy. Resentful energy is also energy.”

“That’s right.” Wen RuoHan hummed as he stopped pacing. “So, in theory, this should work.” He paused again. “Do you know why it doesn’t?”

Lan SiZhui was quiet for a long moment. “Golden Core.”

“Exactly.” Wen RuoHan sounded pleased. “I thought my son might be mistaken. You might’ve just stumbled upon something you didn’t understand and you don’t even know the forces you’re playing around with. But now I see you do know your craft. That’s good.” He paused. “A person’s Golden Core is their initial life source and the source of their spiritual energy. If the Core is damaged or destroyed, the cultivator suffers serious internal injuries and eventually dies. In the west there had been tribes that had experimented with different use of the Golden Core. They would cut a person open and study their Golden Core, just to understand how it worked and how to obtain one, for they were not in possession of this knowledge.

“Resentful energy, while it is just energy as you said, is a different kind of energy than the ones we use to cultivate. It has a general ill temper. It is hard to tame. If this energy is mixed with spiritual energy, it leads to horrible, painful ways to die. Take the righteous Nie Sect for example. They cultivate a Golden Core but their art is killing. They are the lead forces in night-hunting, slaying monsters and such. They unintentionally collect the resentful energy of their victims. The more they kill, the more tainted the Core becomes. This, because resentful energy has an ill temper, infects the mind of the cultivator. Eventually, they become crazed and die of qi deviation.

“This is the righteousness of the Nie Sect. Nothing special, just bad cultivation methods that they have never been able to get rid of, because they keep themselves so far above everyone else that they would never admit to having a connection to demonic cultivation.” This felt like a pointed jab, and surely, Nie MingJue growled in protest. Wen RuoHan continued: “So, how was Xue ChongHai still able to master this craft?” He asked, turning to Lan SiZhui from where he’d been watching Nie MingJue and Lan SiZhui looked up coldly. There was a long pause, then he said:

“I don’t know.”

“No. I don’t suppose you do.” Wen RuoHan said after a pause, walking forward. As he walked past Lan SiZhui, he was turned to watch as Wen RuoHan stopped in front of the Yin Iron. He spread his arms and the heat got worse as he made some movements that would stir his spiritual energy, except they agitated the Yin Iron. He did this for a few moments, then stopped and with a flick of his sleeves, he put his hands behind his back. “Xue ChongHai did not have a Golden Core.”

Lan SiZhui frowned. While generally this discussion confused him, he was also undoubtedly curious about this topic. While he was never as interested in demonic cultivation, this was his former adoptive father’s craft. Lan SiZhui couldn’t help but be curious, wanting to know more about his family, and perhaps learning about demonic cultivation was one way to do so. Still, he hardly understood why Wen RuoHan brought this topic up and talked to him about, like they were two scholars discussing a mutual interest. Surely, Lan SiZhui didn’t want to share anything with Wen RuoHan, much less interests. So, he remained silent, even though questions rose in his mind.

“You’ve heard of Xue ChongHai. Did you know this?” Wen RuoHan turned his head just enough to address Lan SiZhui. He shook his head, giving in. It wouldn’t hurt to listen to the man. “Do you know who killed him?” Came the next question. Lan SiZhui was annoyed, but he answered:

“Wen Mao.”

“Yes.” Wen RuoHan nodded. “A great-great-great ancestor of mine. Because of this, naturally, his records are kept here, in Nightless City. I’ve read them first when I turned sixteen.” He huffed, as if amused. “The Wen Sect had always done great things. Killing Xue ChongHai is just one of them, yet when I read Wen Mao’s records, I couldn’t help, be fascinated.

“Did you know, Lan SiZhui, that Wen Mao and Xue ChongHai were friends once?” He turned to Lan SiZhui with his eyebrows raised. Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I suppose you don’t.” Wen RuoHan nodded. “This happened so long ago, there are only books written about it, but nobody remembers anymore. Xue ChongHai, in his time had been a great grandmaster. His manuals were the most sought after. Wen Mao was of his generation and because of that, they’ve known each other since they were children. Wen Mao thought of him fondly. Xue ChongHai, because of their close relationship shared many secrets with him.

“One of them was the natural spiritual artefact he’d found in the caves near YiLing. Back then, they were called a different name. Today they’re known as the YiLing Burial Mounds.

This artefact gained energy from the universe and had infinite power. Xue ChongHai believed if one learned how to cultivate with it, they would achieve immortality without needing to spend their lives with meditation.

“However, even after years of experimenting, he had not been able to cultivate it. So, Xue ChongHai set out to search for answers why. He’d eventually traveled to the west. He was naïve. He did not know that the western tribes were barbaric and he didn’t suspect they would capture him. He returned with an unmatched fury in his heart and without his spiritual powers. The cultivation world was shocked and they didn’t know what had happened, nor would Xue ChongHai tell. Instead, he shut himself into the caves in Burial Mounds and refused to talk.

“Eventually, Wen Mao had visited him and questioned him. What happened, where have your spiritual powers gone? At this, Xue ChongHai revealed while he was in the west, he was not only attacked and assaulted, his Golden Core was also forcibly removed. He was enraged by this. Having grown up in times of peace, he could not imagine such evil existing in the world. He then swore he would destroy all evil. He just needed to learn how to control the artefact he’d found.

“Wen Mao left him to it, but he’d already sensed the resentment rolling off Xue ChongHai and the artefact drinking it up like a thirsty traveler drinking water. Xue ChongHai worked in secret, however, eventually YiLing experienced a serious case of people going missing. The cultivators who went to investigate the case also went missing, all the while dark energies had been gathering around the Burial Mounds.

“The Sects had decided to take matters into their own hands and went to investigate. Instead of a monster having moved into the area, however, they’ve found Xue ChongHai, working on his artefact he’d named the Yin Iron. When he was questioned, he told the Sects this was the only way to rid this world of evil. If they controlled the monsters, would the monsters attack the people?

“The Sects had attacked Xue ChongHai, but their fallen soldiers just fed more resentful energy into his artefact. Then, the Sects had gathered for a discussion conference to deal with Xue ChongHai. They’ve decided to rally against him. It took thousands of people to die, but Xue ChongHai finally mastered the craft and to show it, he controlled the beast Tortoise of Slaughter. By then, Wen Mao believed he was too crazed and wanted even more power, so instead of controlling beasts to save the people, he unleashed the Tortoise of Slaughter onto the Sects.

“Three years after Xue ChongHai lost his Golden Core, his head was severed by my great-great-great ancestor’s sword.”

“Are you going to speak until we die of boredom, Wen RuoHan?” Nie MingJue spat, unconsciously parroting Lan JingYi’s earlier words to Wen Chao, and Wen RuoHan laughed out loud at that. He turned and with a few strokes, sent a wave of resentful energy towards Nie MingJue.

“Sect Leader Nie!” Lan SiZhui cried out, echoing the others behind him where the Nie soldiers and Lan JingYi were still held hostage. Nie MingJue fell back, writhing on the

ground before his back arched, then he dropped and panted, groaning in pain. There was a long pause when nobody spoke, then as if nothing happened, Wen RuoHan turned back to Lan SiZhui.

“A Golden Core is not compatible with resentful energy. It kills the user within a year. However, if one is without his Core, he might survive for several years afterwards.” He told Lan SiZhui. “What do you make of that?” Lan SiZhui glared at him angrily. Wen RuoHan chuckled. “Of course, nobody would willingly remove their own Cores. But think about it, Lan SiZhui. If you would, you would be the grandmaster of demonic cultivation like Xue ChongHai was. Isn’t that the answer to how to control the Yin Iron?” He gestured at the three shards floating above the pit. Lan SiZhui felt light-headed.

“I disagree.” He said quietly. Wen RuoHan hummed, curious. “Sir, I’ve known someone who could manipulate resentful energy as others manipulate spiritual energy. As far as I knew, he had his Golden Core and always did.”

“Than that person was lying to you either about his cultivation or his Core.” Wen RuoHan told him.

“How could he?” Lan SiZhui looked up. “He was one of the greatest cultivators of his generation.”

“He was definitely lying.” Wen RuoHan nodded. Lan SiZhui glared at him, refusing to believe that.

“If what you say is true, Xue ChongHai might not have had his Golden Core, but mastering the Yin Iron doesn’t mean one needs to lose their Core.” Lan SiZhui said instead of an answer.

“You’re not a stupid man, Lan SiZhui. You know resentful energy and spiritual energy cannot coexist in the same person at once. Have you ever confirmed this person had his Golden Core?” Lan SiZhui hesitated.

“A person cannot live long without his Golden Core.” He said stubbornly.

“Seven years.” Wen RuoHan said and Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows in question. “That’s the longest a person whose Core had been removed survived. If your friend is alive, think when did he start using resentful energy. Seven years later, he will die.”

“Why are you talking our ears off with this?” Lan JingYi asked, eyes wide and full of rage as he struggled in the soldier’s hold. “Huh?”

“JingYi!” Lan SiZhui hissed, not wanting Lan JingYi to have the same fate as Nie MingJue. However, it seemed Wen RuoHan didn’t have such plans. He cast one last look at Lan SiZhui, then turned to look at Lan JingYi over the Yin Iron.

“You’re also a Lan. Haven’t you figured out yet?”

“I’m done with the Wen’s mind games for today.” Lan JingYi said. “Your son already played this. Let us move on and just tell us.”

Lan SiZhui thought about it. Why was Wen RuoHan telling them all this? If he planned to kill them, he wouldn’t bother. At the same time, this was secret enough information that they definitely didn’t need to hear it. Wen RuoHan wasn’t trying to make a different point other than just sharing information. Why? What did he gain by this?

“He’s handling us like good guests despite our positions...” Lan SiZhui mumbled to himself, but it mustn’t have been quiet enough, because Wen Chao answered from behind him.

“Lan SiZhui, you still haven’t figured it out? I’ve told you several times.” He sighed, as if he was disappointed. Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows as Wen Chao crouched in front of him and they locked gazes. “I want you to join your birth family.” Wen Chao told him slowly, emitting an air of superiority.

“And I’ve told you several times. Even if I did, I’m not from the QishanWen Sect. Leave me alone.”

“Now, Lan SiZhui, that might be the only true thing you’ve ever told me.” Wen Chao smirked, then stood, dusting off his clothes as he walked some paces away, hands behind his back. He stopped in front of one of the tapestries. “Do you know what this is?” He pointed at it. Lan SiZhui frowned and shook his head. “This is your family’s history.”

“So?” Lan JingYi complained from the back of the room. “A few paintings should impress us?”

“You’re starting to annoy me.” Wen Chao said coldly, not even looking over at Lan JingYi as he turned back to Lan SiZhui. “I’m not telling you to admire the art. I’m telling you, because I’ve heard Lan SiZhui hadn’t learned much about his birth family.

“Wen GuanTing. One of the greatest of the Wen Sect, had freed the world of countless evils, including a seductive nine-tailed fox demon.” He stepped over to the next. “Wen XinYi.” He paused, his hand hovering in the air. “He was a scholar.” He said in the end, then moved to the next. “Wen ZeMing. He was the one who saved Jin BoXing on that night hunt. If it wasn’t for him, the Jin Sect would not be today.” He stepped up to the last on in that row. “Wen Kun, my grandfather. He dueled Song HanMin, earning the title ‘Phoenix Master’.”

“Say what you mean, Wen Chao.” Nie MingJue grunted from the ground where he was barely holding himself up leaning on his elbow. “We are not here for a history lesson. Stop skirting around the topic. Why are you telling us all of this instead of killing us?”

“I don’t mean anything.” Wen Chao said as he turned back to the room. “I’m just saying it’s such a pity that in the future, the four Sects don’t teach these deeds anymore.”

“In the future?” Nie MingJue frowned. “What do you mean?” Lan SiZhui’s heart raced, but before he could really let this statement sink in, Wen RuoHan cleared up the confusion.

“Lan SiZhui, I asked my son to convince you to join your birth family because some rumors I’ve heard concerned me. Who would’ve thought that in the future the four Sects are so vile they’re not satisfied with only annihilating the Wen Sect, but also stealing their children and refusing to teach them about their Sect? Nie MingJue, don’t you also agree that despite the alleged crimes, a Sect’s good deeds should not be forgotten and erased from history?” He paused, but didn’t give enough time to answer.

“As a member of my Sect, be it part of the main Sect or a familial branch, as a Sect Leader, I am responsible for Lan SiZhui. Any wrongdoings that happened to him are my mistakes. Even though the aforementioned wrongdoings took place at a time when I wasn’t around to protect my disciple, I still feel guilty and would like to make it right. Lan SiZhui. I promise you, with your help, we can change the future and make sure those things will never happen to our people again. All you need to do is to tell me what will happen that will end my life. After all, if I live this time around, I can ensure the safety of your birth family as I have done many years ago as well.”

Lan SiZhui first thought he understood incorrectly. But then, he looked over and also saw Lan JingYi’s wide eyes, staring at him, his face white as fresh snow. Impossible. The word echoed in Lan SiZhui’s head unable to understand what Wen RuoHan just said.

“Didn’t I tell you, Lan SiZhui?” Came Wen Chao’s familiar drawl from behind him. “Day by day you’ve returned to the mountains in the Cloud Recesses, during a time when everyone knows to keep their business behind silencing charms. Yet you were out there, chatting about the future with your friends, talking about people who were yet to be born and who were not yet who they will be.

“My spy-birds, aren’t they clever? Thanks to Wen Qing, even during the guest lectures they were hidden. Nobody suspected we have been listening the whole time. Least of all three juniors who had no idea what a mess they got themselves into by playing a song in the night for fun.”

“Ridiculous.” Nie MingJue huffed. “To believe these kids are from the future, you must be delusional.”

“We didn’t believe it at first either.” Wen Chao nodded, walking towards Nie MingJue with his hands behind his back. “But we waited and listened. Patience is a virtue, Sect Leader Nie.

“First, three juniors who had not been previously there appear out of nowhere. One of them claims to be Sect Leader, yet not only does said Sect already have a leader, he also has a direct heir. Why do you think Jin Ling is so set on saving Jin ZiXuan at all costs? Is Jin ZiXuan so likeable? But a son’s duties are his even if his father does not yet know of his existence. The other one claims his parents are dead, then discovers said parents are freshly married and soon to be pregnant with their first son. Although I admit, Lan JingYi is the least interesting of the lot.” He said, turning to Lan JingYi with a nod.

“As for Lan SiZhui, it was not hard to figure it out. I didn’t lie to you, Sect Leader Nie. When I told you all his crimes, don’t you find it all strange? He knew of things that were yet to happen. I’m sure even during your strategy meetings he’d said things you found odd and might’ve thought to yourself: how could he know that?”

Lan SiZhui felt cold all over despite the heat radiating from the middle of the room. He locked eyes with Lan JingYi and they stared at each other in shock. They had been so careless. Lan SiZhui couldn't even remember all the things they'd discussed without a silencing talisman. They had most certainly discussed the future outdoors several times in places they didn't think anyone would hear them or care about their discussions. How could they have been so careless? So stupid?

"The future?" Nie MingJue frowned, like he couldn't even fathom how this thought even entered Wen Chao's head. "You're delusional. Who would be able to travel through time? If they could, then why didn't they take a whole army to your doors months before the indoctrination even began and put Wen RuoHan's head above the gates on the end of a spear? You claim you don't think Lan SiZhui is a stupid person, yet you ignore the most obvious clue as to why your statement is false: that you're still alive."

"Sect Leader Nie." Wen Chao frowned at him. "You needn't to think much about this. This matter does not concern you. Besides, you will be dead soon."

Wen RuoHan turned to Lan SiZhui then. "Do you have anything to say?" He paused, waiting Lan SiZhui out, who was still reeling from this news. The Wen knew who they were. They probably even designed the battle to go like this and catch them.

"Sect Leader Wen. Traveling in time is impossible. As Sect Leader Nie said, if we knew how, wouldn't have we acted sooner?" He argued weakly, more for the sake of it. The damage was already done.

"A fair argument." Wen RuoHan smirked. "But entirely needless." With this, he held out a hand and a servant rushed up to him, holding a pile of scrolls. On top of them were two familiar-looking, golden wrapped letters. Lan SiZhui's heart sank.

At the time Lan SiZhui's leg was broken. He didn't think much of the letters, preoccupied with other things. Even back then Wen Chao asked him pointed questions, but Lan SiZhui didn't think much of it – now he wondered if he should've paid more attention. He also didn't pay attention where the letters ended up. Truthfully, he forgot about them entirely.

Wen RuoHan took the letters and opened them, reading out loud, first from one, then the other: "*I've heard they're planning the Indoctrination to last three months like the GusuLan lectures, but we all know how it worked out last time, so I'll see you in around a month, hopefully.*" ... "*How did it go last time? Do you remember? I don't, though history had never been my strong suit.*" ... "*You'll be delighted to hear Grandmaster is still alive. But you know that, probably.*" ... "*I suppose I just feel lost in this strange, new world. The Wen are truly as vile as they say. You'd probably disagree, but I kind of see why everyone wanted their blood.*"

"And these are just the letters your friend sent you while you were in Qishan." Wen RuoHan said, then reached for one of the scrolls. "*But isn't that our goal? If ZeWu-Jun helped us, our chances of stopping the war would just rise.*" ... "*No, Lan JingYi, us trying to change the past is one thing. We meddle with it enough as it is. If ZeWu-Jun finds out, that's like killing Wen RuoHan and Jin GuangYao this instant.*"



“I don’t need to keep going, do I?” Wen RuoHan tossed the records to the servant, who bowed deeply, backing away. “I always thought Wen Chao’s spy birds were just pointless toys, but it turns out they hear a lot of things. You needn’t to confirm anything, I already know for sure.”

“What is this nonsense?” Nie MingJue glared at Lan SiZhui, and he swallowed, not meeting the Sect Leader’s eyes. “Conversations caught out of context, this is the unshakable proof you have?” Nie MingJue turned to Wen RuoHan then.

“Sect Leader Nie, if you don’t keep quiet, I’ll have you silenced.” Wen RuoHan told him, but turned to Lan SiZhui. “Those this concerns know what this is.” He said. “Lan SiZhui. I would have had you here earlier, but my son and Wen ZhuLiu turned out to be useless in bringing you to me. Wen Chao even tossed you into the Burial Mounds when he finally got you. He will be thoroughly punished for it.” He said as he turned his head slightly towards Wen Chao, whose eyes widened and bowed his head. “We should treat someone like you with respect. We owe you a lot, both for future wrongdoings and for your unconscious help with this war as well.”

“Sect Leader Wen. What do you want from me?” Lan SiZhui hissed, getting genuinely angry. He wasn’t only angry at Wen RuoHan, but also at himself. He thought he was far past this, that by now he wouldn’t make stupid mistakes out of arrogance anymore as he had done in Mo Manor. Yet it turned out he didn’t learn enough and let his arrogance dictate his actions, he thought he was so clever and learned from his mistakes. Hanguang-Jun would be so disappointed, he thought.

“Despite what you think, your knowledge of the past isn’t crucial.” Wen RuoHan said, humming. “While it would’ve been nice to avoid some misfortune that befell us, this is a small matter at this point. Unlike how you help Lan XiChen, you cannot aid me greatly with this knowledge. However, there is this one thing you can help me avoid.” He looked down at him, his gaze dark and penetrating. Lan SiZhui swallowed thickly. “According to your conversations, I suspect I die here today.” He paused, watching Lan SiZhui. He didn’t know if Wen RuoHan was expecting an answer. He didn’t give one. “Tell me how.”

“If it depends on me, I’ll just carve your heart out of your chest.” Nie MingJue spat behind him. Wen RuoHan held out an arm and suddenly, the Yin Iron reacted and Nie MingJue started seizing, falling back and writhing on the ground. After some time, Wen RuoHan let his hand drop and Nie MingJue stopped struggling.

“How did I die, Lan SiZhui?” Wen RuoHan asked, not taking his eyes off Lan SiZhui the whole time.

“Sect Leader Wen.” Lan SiZhui began, breathing heavy as he watched Nie MingJue groan and moan in pain. “It doesn’t matter if I tell you or not.”

“Why is that?” Wen RuoHan raised his eyebrows.

“Because no matter if it’s Sect Leader Nie, me or someone else. You will die today.” He looked up, willing to convey all his anger through his gaze. Wen RuoHan shook his head.

“How disappointing. Lan SiZhui, I’ve hoped you’d see reason.” He turned then, gesturing the guard behind Lan JingYi, who pulled the other boy on his feet, holding the sword still to his neck, pushing him all the way where Nie MingJue had managed to sit up on his heels. The guard pushed Lan JingYi on his knees again, then stepped back.

“I hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but it seems the Lan truly managed to convince you that you were one of them. Despite my nonchalance, I do not have much time to return you to your senses. I will just file this together with the guilt I feel for letting the Wen Sect fail and abandon you. When this is over and you finally return to your true home, I will repay you for these offenses.” Wen RuoHan said, then he made a series of hand movements and the Yin Iron reacted to it. At first, Lan SiZhui didn’t understand what was happening, then a wave of resentful energy shot out of it, straight towards Lan JingYi.

“No! JingYi!” Lan SiZhui cried, trying to get on his feet, but the guard behind him caught his shoulders and forced him back down, again and again as Lan SiZhui tried to get free.

“Ah!” Lan JingYi cried in alarm, raising his arms to shield himself as the resentful energy reached him, knocking him back onto his back. Wen RuoHan kept up his movements and Lan JingYi seemed to be in pain. Lan SiZhui couldn’t help, only watch.

“Stop!” Lan SiZhui cried and struggled under the guard’s hands desperately.

“If you want me to stop, then tell me what I want to know!” Wen RuoHan said, though he did not turn around to address him. Lan SiZhui gritted his teeth, unable to bear the sight, unable to look away. He glanced around himself, seeing Wen Chao far back behind him, his head tilted to the side almost to his shoulder as he watched with disinterest. He was far enough. The guards around them as well. Everyone was watching what was happening to Lan JingYi.

Lan SiZhui took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. After all, now he needed to concentrate and not miss his chance. He had one chance to do this, one window of opportunity. If he managed to succeed, they might even win. He glanced over, seeing Nie MingJue inching his hand towards Baxia laying on the ground a meter or so away from him. His eyes kept staring at Wen RuoHan though. If Lan SiZhui succeeded, he might be able to move. He wished Nie MingJue would look towards him, so he could relay the message with a look, but the other fixed his gaze on the Wen Sect Leader, so it was Lan SiZhui who had to time this right.

Between one beat and the next, Hudie was out of the qiankun pouch at Lan SiZhui’s side, and as soon as the strings were within reach, Lan SiZhui *played*.

Resentful energy reacted even stronger than it had ever before, ink-like black fog rising around them. It crept up the guard behind Lan SiZhui quicker than one could blink twice, and the man let out a strangled cry as the resentful energy invaded his body through seven orifices. Maybe it was because of the proximity of the Yin Iron, maybe another reason, but Lan SiZhui felt his demonic cultivation stronger than ever before. This time, he didn’t take measures to stop it from invading his guqin and himself, willing it to be even stronger, stronger than Wen RuoHan was.

“Stop him! Break his instrument!” Wen Chao cried, but the soldiers who charged at Lan SiZhui could only get three steps away from him before surging resentful energy pushed them back, sending them flying into the tapestries.

Wen RuoHan spun around, bringing the Yin Iron with him, cradling it between his hands. He glared at Lan SiZhui, manipulating the resentful energy. Lan SiZhui felt it push back, felt Wen RuoHan’s strength. He blocked as long as he could hold up, then fell backwards, slipping on the ground until the back of his head collided with the stairs of the throne. For a moment, his vision blacked out and he was disoriented, then he blinked the dizziness away. He pushed himself up, looking at Wen RuoHan where he stood, glaring at Lan SiZhui.

“Where did you hide that shard, Lan SiZhui?! How did I not sense it?! You didn’t search him?!” He addressed his son, who stood to the side, his sword drawn. Wen Chao’s eyes were wide as a frightened child’s.

“F-father—!”

“Enough!” Wen RuoHan barked. “I don’t care about your excuses. Lan SiZhui, you’re craftier than I thought. You refined the shard into a spiritual tool.” Lan SiZhui was confused. He didn’t have the shard. Wei WuXian did. Except, when he looked around, he saw his guqin lying next to him, resentful energy curling around it, coming from it. And above it, one half of an object was floating. Lan SiZhui had only seen the Stygian Tiger Amulet once, in Guanyin temple as Wei WuXian awakened it to control Baxia’s resentful energy, but he was confident the sight and sounds of those short few minutes had forever burned into his mind.

How? How did Wei WuXian do this in both his lives, the exact same tool? The only difference this time seemed to be that he did not fall into the Burial Mounds to gain his method, but instead stole Lan SiZhui’s scores to learn them and even play them expertly, even if he didn’t understand Qin language well enough he could come up with songs of his own. How did he figure he could refine the Yin Iron into the Stygian Tiger Amulet? When did he even do it?

However, Lan SiZhui didn’t have time to question it, he picked up his guqin, getting on his feet and playing a few scores to attack Wen RuoHan. Unfortunately, half of an amulet was hardly match for three shards. Wen RuoHan’s pushback was fierce and angry, as resentful as the shadows around the two of them. Soon, the whole hall darkened, ink-like fog covering it from floor to ceiling. Whispers rose, shouts of victims of the Yin Iron. Lan SiZhui couldn’t see anyone else, but he heard fighting and assumed the Nie soldiers were finally free. Good.

“Tell me, Lan SiZhui. Tell me.” Wen RuoHan sneered. “My nephew, if you aid me I’ll spare your so-called family, forgive anyone you wish to. I’ll even keep Nie MingJue alive, even though he killed my son. You will be by my side as the new heir of the Wen Sect. You can assassinate Wen Chao or I can lock him up, it’s no matter. Just tell me.”

“Sect Leader Wen, I’m afraid this is impossible. My uncle isn’t you. My uncles are outside those doors, fighting for their lives.” He told Wen RuoHan with an angry grimace of his own.

“Lan SiZhui, see reason already!” Wen RuoHan snapped angrily. “Did the Lan Sect brainwashed you so much?!”

“Sect Leader Wen, why are you so insistent on that Lan SiZhui is with the Lan Sect because they kidnapped him?” Lan JingYi asked as he suddenly appeared by Lan SiZhui’s side out of nowhere. Yingjiu was bloodied in his hand, but Lan SiZhui didn’t mind. The Wen soldiers must’ve taken Zhameng and left Yingjiu, thinking either that Lan JingYi would not dare to use it or that it was not a spiritual tool, but whatever reason they had, Lan SiZhui was grateful they left his sword with Lan JingYi where Jin Ling tucked it after their battle with Wen ZhuLiu. “Without knowing his history, isn’t that arrogant?”

“The Lan Sect has thousands of conducts, I myself had to memorize them once. One of the rules is not to associate with evil. The Lan Sect must’ve made it sound all righteous and heroic, but in reality, taking a child from his family is kidnapping, no matter the circumstances.”

“What if said family is dead?” Lan JingYi jutted out his chin challengingly.

“Who killed them?” Wen RuoHan asked pointedly, and at this, Lan JingYi had no answer. “Killing the family, taking the child. Such a heroic act indeed. Never mind that this family didn’t have to die in the first place.”

“Sect Leader Wen, how dare you talk about things you have no idea about?” Lan JingYi glared, then raised Yingjiu.

“Such big words for someone who has barely experienced the world.” Wen RuoHan laughed. “Even though I don’t know every detail, I’ve seen enough evil in this world, Lan JingYi. How can I not know?”

“Sect Leader Wen, why exactly did you take the Yin Iron shards and began terrorizing the Sects?” Lan SiZhui frowned. “I don’t understand your reasoning.”

“Reasoning?” Wen RuoHan huffed. “You’ve come from such a rotten future, yet you don’t know anything. Look at the four Sects. How satisfied with themselves they are while doing nothing but sitting atop their thrones and drinking expensive wine and meditating. The Wen Sect had always put our people first, but what’s the point if everyone else ignores the issues in the world? Isn’t it finally our time to be selfish? Didn’t we deserve to rise and didn’t they deserve to fall? The Wen Sect is the greatest of them all. It is time the whole world knows.”

“What twisted logic.” Lan JingYi scoffed. “Couldn’t you just do this at a discussion conference? Why must you terrorize people, why must Cloud Recesses and Lotus Pier burn for your ambitions?!”

“Because I can burn them.” Wen RuoHan said with a glare. “Because all this power that those hypocrite Sects call evil, is all mine. They don’t need it, so I will take it. Do not fault me for using it to my disposal.”

“You’re deranged.”

“There is one thing in this world that truly matters, and that is power. Who dares to counter me if I have the shadows at my disposal and an army at my call regardless how many men I have?”

“I dare to counter you.” Lan JingYi said seriously, which made Wen RuoHan laugh.

“Fine, fine!” He called out. “Then let us see what you can do!” With this, he made several moves that already indicated for Lan SiZhui he was about to use the Yin Iron.

“JingYi, look out!” He called out as he played something that might neutralize the effects. Lan JingYi in the meantime went for the offensive as well, thrusting his sword forward. Wen RuoHan attacked. Lan SiZhui blocked the spell with his own resentful energy, but it was weak. Lan JingYi had to be quicker.

He watched as Lan JingYi attacked again and Wen RuoHan got out of the way, dodging the attack effortlessly. Lan SiZhui did his best to distract the Wen Sect Leader. Wen RuoHan for a while was able to fight both of them at once, for he mostly needed to block Lan JingYi’s attacks, not attack. Then, he thrust out a hand. Before Lan SiZhui could realize what happened, he saw Lan JingYi land a few meters away, spitting out a mouthful of blood. Yingjiu landed on the ground with a hollow sound.

Lan SiZhui focused back onto Wen RuoHan, fighting him over the control of the Yin Iron. He was so distracted, as was Wen RuoHan, that neither of them noticed Lan JingYi getting up.

He saw movement behind Wen RuoHan, a sliver of white fabric swaying with the movement of its owner and suddenly realized Lan JingYi was about to attack. Wanting to keep Wen RuoHan occupied, he began talking:

“Sect Leader Wen, while it is true I was born into the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect, I have no desire to join them in this war. Please, excuse my rejection.”

“So, you’ve made your decision.” Wen RuoHan hummed.

“But I will tell you how you die.” Lan SiZhui said, following his speech. “You’ll die by the hand of my brother.”

With this, Wen RuoHan coughed up blood, looking down at his chest, where Yingjiu’s tip stuck out, dripping softly with vibrant red blood, the same shade as Wen RuoHan’s robes. Lan JingYi pulled Yingjiu back and Wen RuoHan fell onto his knees, eyes wide as he looked up at Lan SiZhui.

“Sect Leader Wen. One thing I can promise you. I will not let the Wen Sect be forgotten as it had been in the future. Your heritage to the world, all the good you did, children like me will learn and appreciate. But what you did here today, the evil of the Wen Sect won’t be forgotten either. Because of this, all you have to blame is yourself.”

Wen RuoHan tried to speak, but blood bubbled out of his lips and his eyes rolled back. In the end, he fell forward, the Yin Iron shards scattering on the ground by Lan SiZhui’s feet. Lan SiZhui looked up, locking gazes with Lan JingYi. They were both breathing heavily, standing over Wen RuoHan’s body, the Stygian Tiger Amulet rolling above Hudie, reacting to the Yin Iron, blood dripping from Yingjiu’s tip.

“Did I...?” Lan JingYi stared at the body of the Wen Sect Leader. Lan SiZhui nodded, clapping a hand on his shoulder. The ink-like fog began to disappear. “Awesome!” Lan JingYi said in awe.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “You were.” At this, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a small smile.

However, before they could enjoy the win, a new voice sounded.

“Father!” Wen Chao’s pained cry echoed over the room and Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as they both looked towards the man, who had blood splattered all over his face, two Nie soldiers lying at his feet. Now, that the resentful energy thinned around them, Lan SiZhui could see several Wen soldiers also lying dead. Nie MingJue stood near the door, Baxia supporting his weight as the other man was weak from torture. Regardless, about a dozen dead Wen soldiers laid in front of him where they probably wanted to break into the reception hall.

“Lan SiZhui!” Wen Chao bellowed, looking over at Lan SiZhui. “I will kill you for this!” With this, he swung his sword, sending a strong wave of spiritual energy towards the two of them. Lan SiZhui tried to block it, but even so, he was pushed back. He and Lan JingYi crashed into the tables to the side. Lan SiZhui pushed himself onto his elbows, but before he had time to get up, Wen Chao was there, stabbing with his sword, and Lan SiZhui had to roll away to avoid the blade into his eye.

He had to realize, as he kept evading the attacks, in reality, he had no idea about Wen Chao’s spiritual powers. He knew Wen Chao wasn’t a great warrior, nor was he a great cultivator, but just because he wasn’t accomplished, it didn’t mean he wasn’t strong.

Lan SiZhui had the opportunity to kick Wen Chao away from himself and he took it, using the time he bought to pick up Hudie and leap away from the previous spot, just in time for Wen Chao to strike where he’d been. Lan SiZhui landed back next to the Yin Iron, and started playing, but before he could finish one note, Wen Chao was already there. Lan SiZhui would not have the time to fight with resentful energy, but lacking spiritual powers, engaging in duel would be suicidal. As he ducked from yet another swipe, he thought hard and fast. In the end, he came to the conclusion there was only one way for him to fight if he wanted to win this.

“Stop moving, so I can cut off your head.” Wen Chao told him, eyes wide and crazed by grief and revenge. He bared his teeth in a feral gesture, teeth red, eyes bloodshot. Lan SiZhui apologized him internally and the next time he rolled away from Wen Chao, he picked something up from the ground. He leapt up to Wen RuoHan’s throne and with some quick notes, established the connection. He looked up, seeing Wen Chao coming at him with his sword pointed. Taking one last, deep breath, Lan SiZhui strummed the strings.

He’d never felt as strong resentful energy, not even in the Burial Mounds, as he did when he activated the Yin Iron. Immediately screams filled his ears and he doubled over, holding his head. But the screams faded almost immediately, and he looked up, one of his eyes squeezed shut, for his head felt like splitting behind it. Wen Chao was lying on the ground in front of the stairs leading up to the throne, breathing heavy.

There was silence for a long moment when nobody moved. Even Nie MingJue, where he had Baxia run through a Wen soldier who had attacked Nie ZongHui. Lan JingYi was in the process of getting on his feet, holding his head that was bleeding and he looked upon the scene with a frown.

Eventually, Wen Chao groaned and turned onto his side, climbing sluggishly on his feet.

“Lan SiZhui...” He panted, turning to Lan SiZhui, his sword hanging limply by his side. “ChunYu-Jun, they call him, but in reality, he is just a demonic cultivator, not better than his uncle, Wen RuoHan, instead. Am I not doing a favor for the world... If I kill you?!” With this, he charged once again. Lan SiZhui played his guqin, this time using less power, but the Yin Iron still reacted violently to his commands and Wen Chao fell onto the steps, screaming as he curled up. At the pained sound Lan SiZhui took his hand away from Hudie as if it was burned, but Wen Chao didn’t seem overly phased. He spat out a mouthful of blood and laughed, sounding hysterical.

“ChunYu-Jun is truly talented, using the Yin Iron as my father had!”

“It’s not intentional, I—” Lan SiZhui looked down at Hudie in horror. What was he doing?

“Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui looked up and saw Wen Chao’s smirk and determined gaze. “Die!” He cried and leapt up again, gritting his teeth. Instead of using Hudie, Lan SiZhui spun away from the blade, but that still grazed his shoulder. He didn’t have time to react, Wen Chao turning into the next attack. Lan SiZhui bagged Hudie and leapt away, but Wen Chao followed closely.

“SiZhui!” Suddenly a new voice called out, and Lan SiZhui looked over to see Jin Ling run inside. This distraction cost him, and Wen Chao’s blade penetrated his skin at his shoulder. He quickly stepped away, so it didn’t go too deep, but this just encouraged Wen Chao to keep attacking. Lan SiZhui dodged as much as he could. From behind them, he heard Jin Ling yelling something, but he couldn’t afford to pay attention.

At the end, he ended up on the ground on his back, Wen Chao’s sword cutting into the delicate flesh of his fingers as he tried to keep the blade from severing his head with his bare hands. Wen Chao snarled into his face. His own was taunt, his eyes red rimmed. Lan SiZhui noted in terror he had a few black veins running up his face.

“Get lost!” Was all he heard before Wen Chao was violently knocked off from on top of him by an extremely strong yellow spiritual sword glare. He looked over wide-eyed, Lan JingYi just arriving to his side and they saw together Jin Ling standing just inside the door, in his hand a sight they hoped to not see in this timeline: Suihua. He had a stern expression on his face.

“You again!” Wen Chao cried, angry. “I will kill all of you!” He declared, sweeping a hand over the room in a wide gesture. “One. By. One. You will die. Die!” The black veins crept even further up on his face and he roared, head thrown back. Lan SiZhui watched horrified.

“What the fuck did you do?” Jin Ling called over to Lan SiZhui, but then he had to block an attack from Wen Chao. Suihua answered each and every of his orders beautifully as he

dueled with Wen Chao. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi could only watch.

While it was true Jin Ling was more talented with the bow than the sword, naturally he was an excellent swordsman for his age. As he fought, he even used all his knowledge, not only the flashy Jin sword style and the agile Jiang Sect styles, but he integrated the stiff Lan Sect style as well. Though his coordination was clumsy and Wen Chao was much older than him, so naturally he was more experienced, if Jin Ling's opponent was a junior disciple, he would hold up greatly.

Unfortunately, this wasn't enough to end Wen Chao.

"JingYi, go, help!" Lan SiZhui pushed at his friend, who dazedly picked up Yingjiu. Lan SiZhui instantly regretted sending him. After all, Lan JingYi wasn't in a much better state than him. However, just as Lan JingYi joined the fight, another person joined. Baxia's red sword glare cut through the air, catching Wen Chao on his back, though it seemed to agitate him more than hurt him at this point. Lan SiZhui felt useless, lying there, panting with his chest tight and blood welling in his throat, but there was not much he could do.

There was a lull, a pause in the fight as the three of them, two severely injured and one without his primary spiritual tool surrounding Wen Chao, whose eyes have also turned black. He snarled at the three of them, then looked over and with a leap, he got out of the circle, raising his sword and aiming it at Lan SiZhui. His eyes widened as he was unable to move out of the way.

"SiZhui!" He heard more voices calling out. Before Wen Chao could reach him though, suddenly a sword pierced through his chest, Suihua's elegant sword point jutting out proudly from where Wen Chao's heart was. He fell and clutched at his chest.

"Lan SiZhui..." He growled. "Killing your own family cold-blooded... You really are... a Wen disciple." He laughed, blood dripping from his mouth.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." Lan SiZhui whispered, tears in his eyes, still horrified by the Yin Iron's fierce powers. While he had no love lost towards Wen Chao, he never intended to hurt someone like this. He knew Wen Chao was his enemy, but torture was not something he should ever engage in. Just the thought he'd hit Wen Chao with the Yin Iron's power made him feel sick. "I'm sorry." He repeated.

Wen Chao glared at him, eyes wide. Then, his mouth opened, the corners pulling up into a grotesque smile, and Lan SiZhui thought he might say something. Instead, blood dripped from his mouth and with one last breath, he collapsed to the side.

Lan SiZhui could only stare at the corpse.

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi called out, hurrying over. "Are you okay?" He gripped Lan SiZhui's shoulder, helping him sit up, but Lan SiZhui stopped him, feeling dizzy and faint.

"Suihua how—" He began, but before he could finish the sentence, Jin Ling was there, wiping said sword on his outer robes.



“Jin ZiXuan was done with fighting, so I... borrowed it.”

“He’s okay?” Lan SiZhui asked earnestly.

“Of course, he is okay.” Jin Ling glared at him. “My only goal here is to save him. Do you think I’d let him die so easily?”

“Okay, calm down, this was a logical question.” Lan JingYi weakly boxed into Jin Ling’s shoulder. Then, he seemed to think of something and asked sharply: “You took his sword without asking?” Lan JingYi frowned and Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“I borrowed it, does that imply I didn’t ask?” He clicked his tongue, crossing his arms across his chest.

“When I learned how to read, write and speak, I didn’t think I’d need to relearn it, just because Young Mistress’ vocabulary is different than the rest of ours.” Lan JingYi said, annoyed. Lan SiZhui began seeing little black dots in his vision.

“JingYi.” He said, gripping his friend’s forearm. “The Yin Iron.”

“Huh? Didn’t you have it?” Lan JingYi looked around.

“Here.” Lan SiZhui pulled out his qiankun pouch. “Destroy it. Now.”

“Okay, how do we—SiZhui? SiZhui!”

Lan SiZhui’s eyes rolled back and he lost consciousness.

# Casuistry I.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A soft breeze crossed the room, rustling some papers, bringing the fresh scent of summer with it. Cloths ruffled as it disturbed the peace inside and something softly knocked on the wooden table. The scent of old, relaxing incense was strong, but after some more shuffling, ruffling and knocking, a new scent floated through the room.

Lan SiZhui swallowed thickly as he smelled the flowery incense, reminding him of some kind of dish he ate as a child. It, too, had that sweet taste and the person feeding him also had this scent clinging to his clothes. Wen Ning's old face, the face of the Ghost General flashed in his mind, and a small, but expensive wooden bowl with a flower burned into the bottom of it. After that, the bowl was Lan SiZhui's, he often played with it before meals. He loved that bowl. He wondered where he got it from and where it went after the siege. His toys, the only other possessions he had were on him when Lan WangJi found him, but his bowl must've been left at the dining hall.

He blinked his eyes open, seeing a familiar ceiling above him. It was the same as his and Lan WangJi's rooms had been during the indoctrination, so he was most likely in Qishan, for the Wen style was unmistakable. Above him the curtain of the bed was drawn open and it swayed gently from a breeze through an open window or door somewhere in the room.

Moments later, he heard someone draw in a deep breath in the room, then the soft sounds of a flute filled the room. Liebing's familiar song relaxed Lan SiZhui and he smiled as he listened to the song. It wasn't unfamiliar, but it had been a while since Lan SiZhui heard the song. It was a common song to be played by civilians. Lan SiZhui was a little surprised Lan XiChen didn't play something with spiritual energy, but he was still grateful for the song.

It was one of the first songs Lan SiZhui learned on the qin. It wasn't overly complicated, though not a nursery rhyme either. Lan XiChen was the one who taught him. It was like a lost memory, emerging from the depths of his consciousness, much like the one with the bowl had been. It was such an important thing for Lan SiZhui back then, but then it disappeared as more, stronger memories were created.

If it wasn't for the interior of the room, Lan SiZhui would've thought this was his Lan XiChen, ZeWu-Jun, his uncle from the future. He let himself pretend as he listened to the flute, tempted to go back to sleep to ghost images of his home in the future.

A few minutes later the song came to a stop and Lan XiChen transitioned into *Cleansing* seamlessly. Lan SiZhui waited until the song ended, closing his eyes and letting Lan XiChen's familiar spiritual energy wash over him. Once the song was done, he heard Lan XiChen take a deep breath to start a new song, so he made his awareness known:

"ZeWu-Jun." Lan XiChen's breath hitched and Lan SiZhui heard him get up and soft footfalls sounded on the wooden floors as he came over. His face was in a worried frown as

Lan SiZhui immediately tried to sit up. He adjusted the pillow so Lan SiZhui could lean back against it, then sat at his hips, taking his wrist into his hand and checked his pulse. Only then did his features smooth out and he looked up at Lan SiZhui with a smile.

“How are you feeling?”

Lan SiZhui thought about the question for a moment. He mostly felt fine. His head was a little foggy and aching, but that could’ve been from only waking up moments before. His wrist and shoulder hurt from where he pushed himself up. Otherwise, he felt fine, although there was a familiar tightness to his chest that he realized was from a damaged Core, possibly damaged meridians as well, if Wen ZhuLiu told him the truth and attacked him this way. It felt almost like he was back in the Burial Mounds.

“Just minor discomforts, otherwise I’m not in serious pain.” He settled on this answer.

“That’s good. Ah, here.” Lan XiChen reached over and poured him some water from the jug at the end of the bed. Lan SiZhui sent him a grateful smile as he took the cup and drank the water eagerly. Finally, his mouth didn’t feel like something died in it, though he was still thirsty. Lan XiChen must’ve noticed, because he poured him once more. This cup Lan SiZhui didn’t finish, just lowered into his lap so he could talk to Lan XiChen.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“The battle was five days ago.” Lan XiChen told him. Lan SiZhui was instantly worried he’d missed something important. It must’ve shown on his face, because Lan XiChen shook his head. “We’re still getting ourselves in order. There’s nothing to worry about. Sect Leader Jin is in charge of cleaning up the mess, so all you have to do is rest.”

“Sect Leader Jin?” Lan SiZhui asked back, confused. Lan XiChen nodded.

“Jin GuangShan came as soon as he heard we were marching into Nightless City to aid us. He was... unfortunately a day late.”

“I don’t understand. Even Wen Chao got here in time and Cloud Recesses is further away than Koi Tower. Did something happen on his journey?” Lan XiChen looked at him with an unreadable expression, then shook his head with a small smile.

“Let’s not talk about politics on your sickbed. I’m sure Jin Ling and Lan JingYi will fill you in once they’re here.”

“Ah, where are they? Are they alright?” He looked around, but didn’t see any sign of his friends in the room.

“Jin Ling is mostly unharmed.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Though he does have a deep cut on his arm, but because he only joined the close proximity fight towards the end of the battle, once he was out of arrows, he didn’t sustain more injuries. As for Lan JingYi...” Lan XiChen drew in a deep breath a little furrow appearing between his eyebrows and Lan SiZhui was instantly worried. “He is not in danger.” Lan XiChen was quick to reassure, probably seeing how Lan

SiZhui tensed. “But he had been affected by the Yin Iron as was MingJue. They both need acupuncture and strong medicine as well as cleansing.”

“But are they—”

“They’re alright.” Lan XiChen nodded. “But it’s better for them to stay in the healers’ wards until qi deviation is definitely avoided.”

“Qi deviation?” Lan SiZhui felt his throat close and he reached up, wiping a few tears from his eyes.

“Don’t worry.” Lan XiChen put a hand on his arm. “It sounds worse than it is, I promise. I was just by to see them. JingYi won’t stop complaining about the needles and MingJue isn’t faring much better, though with more dignity. Jin Ling is there now, visiting Lan JingYi. The healers are working very hard to get him out of there. It’s actually not long now, when I was there this morning, they said they might even be finished tomorrow.” He smiled. Lan SiZhui nodded, settling back. “As for yourself, I suspect you already know, but your meridians and Core had been seriously damaged.” Lan SiZhui nodded, knowing this.

“It’s like when Wen Chao threw me into the Burial Mounds.”

“You didn’t have your spiritual powers then either?” Lan XiChen furrowed his brows and Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“It was slow to return. Only when I went to meditate in seclusion in Cold Pond Cave, did it fully return.” Lan XiChen nodded.

“That’s what the healers advised as well, so that’s good. Until then, you have some lingering resentful energy in your meridians. Because of this, your other injuries are also slow to heal.”

“The same thing happened back then as well.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Though now it’s summer, so maybe I won’t get sick as often.” He looked over and out the window that was open on the other side of the room.

“I’m sorry you had to go through it once and that you have to go through this again.” Lan XiChen said with a small frown. Lan SiZhui shrugged. “I almost forgot, I have some medicine prepared for you.” Lan XiChen said as he stood, going over to the low table.

Lan SiZhui looked around the room while he got the medicine. While he first thought this looked like their room during the indoctrination, he had to realize it was a little different. There were huge windows, the one on the far side of the room opened to let breeze in. It was sunny outside, causing the room to be light and airy. The décor was the usual dark red and black of the Wen Sect, the furniture also tainted reddish.

Hudie was on the low table not far from the bed, and on a tray next to it was a jar of polish oil and a used rag as well as stringing tools. Someone was taking good care of his guqin. Lan XiChen was preparing his medicine there, far away enough from Hudie that Lan SiZhui wasn’t worried. There were two swords in the sword holder, Feixu and Yingjiu beside each other like they belonged there.

At the table beside the bed was a forehead ribbon, but it wasn't his, for there wasn't that little fray at the end where Lan SiZhui often chewed it as a child. He frowned, reaching up, but his own ribbon was missing. As Lan XiChen turned back to him, he noticed the movement. Before commenting on it, he came over and handed him the medicine.

"The doctor prescribed this to drink twice a day." He said, then sat on the bed again. "Your forehead ribbon... I'm afraid it couldn't be saved." He said sadly. "After the servants couldn't get the blood out of it, even Jin Ling tried. He asked me as well, but as strong Lan cleaning spells are... It was beyond that point, I'm afraid. Lan JingYi has it, in case you still want it back."

"Thank you for trying anyways." Lan SiZhui nodded, then looked over at the new ribbon again. He would miss his old one. He'd been fortunate that he never lost or damaged it before beyond the point of salvaging it, though he knew it wasn't uncommon. Hanguang-Jun of his time had three before the one he wore currently. He reached over and ran a finger over the ribbon, but didn't put it on. When one was sick, it wasn't required, and Lan XiChen didn't seem to mind.

"A lot have happened since the battle." Lan XiChen sighed, his eyes also fixed on the ribbon. "It is past us, yet it weights on me still." He paused, and Lan SiZhui didn't really understand what he meant, but he knew this tone Lan XiChen used. It was reserved for thoughts he just wanted to say out loud for the sake of it. He quickly shook himself out of his mood and stood. "I better inform Jin Ling and JingYi that you're awake. You don't mind if I leave you here? Despite what I told Jin Ling, I do actually have matters to tend to."

"Ah, of course!" Lan SiZhui was quick to reassure. "I don't want to hold up Sect Leader Lan."

"No need to be so formal, we've already agreed." Lan XiChen chuckled. "I'll get going now. I hope we'll see you on the celebration two days from now."

"I'll try my best." Lan SiZhui nodded.

"Get well." Lan XiChen nodded back and Lan SiZhui bowed as much as he could while sitting as Lan XiChen stepped out of the room.

Lan SiZhui slumped in bed once the door closed, letting his head fall back against the headboard. He suspected there would be a lot to do, a lot to clear up and discuss later, but for now, he let himself just be in the moment and not worry about the future. After all, the war was over, finally. He needn't to look over his shoulder, afraid of who was chasing him, nor would he need to plot and raid and fight for now. Even though he just woke up, he was exhausted. He figured it would be a few minutes until Jin Ling arrived, so he shifted down a little, so instead of his back, the pillow would support his head and closed his eyes, just until Jin Ling came.



"Finally." Lan SiZhui heard when he blinked his eyes open. As he looked towards where the voice came from, he saw Jin Ling sitting at the low table, lazily flicking a finger over the

strings of Hudie, but his face, where he held in in his hand, his elbow on the table, was turned towards Lan SiZhui. “Lan XiChen sends word that you’re finally awake, I arrive, and you’re passed out. Shame on you for making me cut my visit short.”

“Sorry.” Lan SiZhui felt his face heat as he pushed himself up in a sitting position. “I really only meant to close my eyes for a few minutes.”

“Whatever.” Jin Ling waved it off. “JingYi says my bedside manners are worse than Lan WangJi’s anyways, and that’s an insult if I ever heard one.”

“Hanguang-Jun is caring with his patients.” Lan SiZhui argued, then shook his head. “Though Lan JingYi was rarely his patient, so I understand how he didn’t know that. How is he?”

“Bitchy.” At Lan SiZhui’s look, he rolled his eyes. “He’s complaining all the time, because the needles are supposedly hurting him. Otherwise he’s fine. His injuries are all almost healed.”

“That’s good to hear.” Lan SiZhui smiled. Jin Ling sighed and pushed himself up, going over and pouring a cup of water that he then passed to Lan SiZhui. He took it gratefully and Jin Ling sat at the edge of his bed. “Ah, how is your arm?”

“You finally ask?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue. “It’s fine. Almost healed. Unlike the two of you, my Golden Core is intact.”

“That’s very good news.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Don’t get too excited just yet. There are bad news. My grandfather is also here.”

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun mentioned that.” Lan SiZhui peered at his friend curiously. “How come he only arrived a day after the battle?”

“You don’t know?” Jin Ling frowned at him. “Naturally, it’s because he wanted to see who won first. If Wen RuoHan, he would’ve come saying he was here to help Wen RuoHan. If we won, he would come and say he was here to support us. It’s very predictable, really. But it does complicate some things.”

“Complicate things?” Lan SiZhui frowned. “Sorry, I’m still a bit...” He gestured at his head, hoping to convey his head was still foggy and sluggish.

“Well, in the past, after the Jin Sect Leader had appeared, many Wen had been executed, and sent to Qiongqi Path.” Jin Ling said with a grimace. “Now that Wei WuXian is in the possession of the Stygian Tiger Amulet once again, who knows what he will do if Wen Ning ends up there again.”

“Executed?” Lan SiZhui asked softly and Jin Ling clicked his tongue.

“Don’t worry. I told Lan XiChen if he let it happen again you would never talk to him again. This is why he’s constantly talking to Jiang FengMian and Jin GuangShan. They’re trying to work out how to deal with everything.” He paused. “There will be a celebration ceremony

two days from now and afterwards a discussion conference. I believe everything will be finalized there. I was told until then, nobody will make any moves and the Wen who had been captured will be held captive until it's decided what to do with them. Jin GuangShan doesn't dare to make a decision without Nie MingJue anyways."

"That's good then." Lan SiZhui nodded. "We still have time."

"Mn." Jin Ling hummed.

"Ah, Suihua...?" Lan SiZhui looked around, but he didn't see the sword anywhere. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"You and JingYi both think so little of me. Jin ZiXuan is perfectly fine. I took his sword because mine is useless and my bow is unsuitable for close-proximity fight. In fact, minutes after you passed out, he arrived and I gave it back to him. Once you're on your feet, you can go confirm it with your own eyes."

"I believe you." Lan SiZhui said, though what he did not say was: 'If he were dead, you wouldn't be here either'. He didn't know if that was true, but his guess was strong enough.

Jin Ling made a sound as if he just remembered something. "Ah, the Yin Iron had been destroyed."

"It was?" Lan SiZhui looked at him with wide eyes. Jin Ling nodded.

"Three shards had been destroyed by Nie MingJue right after the battle. As soon as he destroyed them with Baxia, he passed out. It was like he dropped dead. I was terrified I'd have to deal with his resentful ghost again. Thankfully, he's alright."

"And..."

"The Stygian Tiger Amulet? It disappeared by the time we got your guqin from your qiankun pouch." Jin Ling explained. "JingYi said it was supposed to be there but we didn't find it. Wei WuXian's half is still with him, though he's hiding it well, nobody figured it out yet, so most likely the whole thing is with him."

"If he's hiding it well, how do you know?"

"I saw him put it away once the puppets dropped after the battle." Jin Ling said. "He didn't want anyone to know it."

"I see." Lan SiZhui hummed. "Is everyone else alright?"

"Yes." Jin Ling nodded. "Most of us survived and the puppets are also getting treated. I would say from what I've heard in numbers, we fared better than the Sects had during the original war."

"JingYi must be pleased." Lan SiZhui smiled.

“Are you kidding? Everyone is pleased.” He paused. “Except JingYi. When I came back, he kept yelling after me to tell you he is thinking of you.”

“ZeWu-Jun said his injuries are healing well.”

“As much as they can here, yes. Both him and Nie MingJue will have to go to Cloud Recesses once this is over, but it’s just some lingering damage the healers can’t get rid of in this place. They will let the two of them go tomorrow, that’s why the celebration ceremony is being held two days later.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui hummed. “Did something else happen?”

“Not really.” Jin Ling shrugged. “Once you fainted, I concluded you were alive. I told Nie MingJue to destroy the Yin Iron while Lan JingYi got the shards from your pouch. Then Nie MingJue collapsed. By then, Lan XiChen arrived to the palace as well, with the others. After confirming Wen RuoHan’s death, they called healers and everyone started getting treatment. We rested for a day, then Jin GuangShan arrived with the rest of the Jin army as well as with some of the smaller Clan Leaders who also didn’t join the war.

“They offered to go through the Nightless City, make sure the Wen were captured and once that was done, we were taken here and distributed into rooms. Ever since then, the Sect Leaders had been constantly behind closed doors, discussing, while the rest of us had been resting up after the battle and receiving the arriving people. Mother came as well as Nie HuaiSang, and a bunch of other people I assume are also family members of the major Sects.”

“So, nothing else happened.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “That’s good then.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling nodded as well. “For the first time, I’m glad nothing is happening. You should use this time to rest. Who knows when we will get a chance again. We still have to save my father, there’s a lot to do.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded and shifted down the bed, so his head was on the pillow again. Jin Ling shifted as well, and leaned against the other end of the bed, looking out the window, falling silent. For a moment, Lan SiZhui watched him, then his eyes closed.

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“SiZhui!” Lan SiZhui looked over at the closed door. “SiZhui!” The sound was closer this time, and seconds later the door slammed open, Lan JingYi appearing in the door, looking around. “SiZhui!” He grinned widely when their gazes met and Lan SiZhui couldn’t help, smiled back at him fondly.

“Idiot, keep it down!” Jin Ling looked up from where he’d been reading poetry at the low table, Hudie now on the guqin stand next to the sword stand. “Do you want to alert the whole Nightless City that you’re out of the healers’ hands?”

“Shut up! You didn’t even come to get me, I had to ask random people for directions.” Lan JingYi complained as he went over and sat on Lan SiZhui’s bed. Jin Ling rolled his eyes and



stood, going over to close the door.

“I told you when I left yesterday that I’ll stay with SiZhui.”

“You said you were going to help him heal and we both know you know nothing about healing, so I assumed you were talking nonsense and that you’d return to help me out instead.”

“I’m helping him heal.” Jin Ling said confidently, going back to the table. “If I’m here, nobody who comes in can bully him. That’s good for his health.”

“MouShi, your idea of healing has nothing to do with actual healing.” Lan JingYi told him.

“Is that so?” Jin Ling hummed. “Then perhaps you’ll let me practice my acupuncture skills on you. To help your junior learn medicine, what do you say, respected Feng CiKe?” Feng CiKe? Lan SiZhui looked at Jin Ling, then Lan JingYi confused, but the two of them ignored him.

“Practice on yourself.” Lan JingYi made a disgusted face, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” Lan SiZhui smiled. “And you?”

“Ah, it’s weird. It’s like something’s squeezing my chest tight. The healers say it’s the resentful energy blocking my meridians. It’s not painful, just really strange and uncomfortable.” Lan SiZhui nodded, knowing the exact feeling Lan JingYi was talking about, for he was currently also feeling the same.

“You’ll feel better once we’re back in Cloud Recesses.” Lan SiZhui promised and Lan JingYi smiled at him.

“If we survive the celebration tomorrow.” Jin Ling added grumbling from the table. The two Lan looked over.

“It can’t be that bad.”

“You’ll see.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“Have either of you talked to Young Master Wei yet?” Lan SiZhui asked after a pause and the two shared a look.

“He’s been spending time with the Jiang. Grandfather – Sect Leader Jiang – had been injured during the battle in Qishan. He was cut on his torso severely, and while it is healing nicely, it is still a major wound. The Jiang Sect had been keeping an eye on him to make sure he doesn’t overdo it. While he’s at discussions with the other Sect leaders, Uncle and Wei WuXian are helping out with the Sect business.” Jin Ling said. “I haven’t seen him around much, they mostly keep to their own courtyard in the palace. Why? Do you want to talk to him?”

“I should.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“You’ll have the opportunity to tomorrow.” Lan JingYi said. “You just woke up, don’t move around much. There are a lot of people who want to talk to you.”

“That’s true.” Jin Ling nodded. “I suspect Lan XiChen had been holding them back from coming.”

“Why do they want to talk to me?” Lan SiZhui asked, alarmed.

“They probably want to thank you for what you’ve done during the battle.” Lan JingYi shrugged.

“I didn’t do anything.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I didn’t even kill Wen RuoHan.”

“No, but if it wasn’t for you, Feng CiKe wouldn’t have had the chance to do so. You also killed Wen ZhuLiu, and a lot of people were grateful for this.” Jin Ling explained.

“They also thanked me.” Lan JingYi huffed. “And of course, MouShi got his share of compliments as well. That move to kill Wen Chao was impressive!” He grinned and Lan SiZhui smiled at his friend.

“Ah, JingYi, why does Jin Ling keep calling you Feng CiKe?” He asked in a conspirational tone, though he’d pretty much figured it out by now, he wanted Lan JingYi have a chance to explain.

“Ah, yes!” Lan JingYi, as Lan SiZhui suspected he would, beamed proudly. “Nie MingJue gave me the title before he passed out, do you like it? I think it’s fierce-sounding.”

“It’s...” Lan SiZhui searched for words. “Now that I know who gave you, I understand. It’s a strong title.” He nodded. “When people hear it, they will know you were the one to kill Wen RuoHan.”

“Though I don’t want to be associated with killing.” Lan JingYi frowned. “Do you really like it?”

“I think it’s a good title. It... My and Jin Ling’s titles are closely associated with our personalities. Your title is more like Senior Wei’s YiLing Patriarch. There’s nothing wrong with this, I think it’s also a respectable title. Since it doesn’t tie into your personality, you also cannot say you’re being associated with murder.” When Lan SiZhui finished speaking, Lan JingYi had a thoughtful expression on his face. On the other side of the room, Jin Ling hummed.

“Of course, this is what I’ve been trying to explain to Lan JingYi, but naturally, ChunYu-Jun is more eloquent with his words as well as JingYi only listens to you.”

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi both chose to ignore his words and Lan JingYi nodded, looking up with a smile.

“I see what you mean. You’re right.”

They were quiet for a long moment, then Lan SiZhui decided it was time to address all the questions he had since the battle. He began in the beginning.

“Jin Ling, may I ask something?”

“Why couldn’t you?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“At the beginning of the battle, you mentioned two spies. One you were thinking of was Jin GuangYao, but who was the other?”

“Who else?” Jin Ling frowned at him confusedly. “Su She.”

“But Su She wasn’t working with Meng Yao at this time.” Lan JingYi joined, agreeing with Lan SiZhui.

“Must I think for the two of you? Use your heads.” Jin Ling scoffed at them, then after a pause, sighed, annoyed. “Su She is working for the Wen. Or worked. Who knows whom he made the deal with. Haven’t you realized?”

“But what makes you think that?” Lan JingYi furrowed his brows. “Have he been in the past as well? Did this also get revealed in Guanyin Temple?”

“What, everything makes sense.” Jin Ling looked at them expectantly, then clicked his tongue when they didn’t react. “When Cloud Recesses was burned, Su She was inside, he was among the captured disciples. Then months later when Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui went to reclaim it, he was in Moling. When I went there to look for Lan JingYi, Wen forces turned the whole Lan Sect territory upside down to look for ZeWu-Jun. I’ve found that many small Clans were slaughtered, those that weren’t hid away, that’s why they stayed alive. Arguably the Su Clan is the second biggest Clan after the Lan in the area, mainly because of their familial connections. Exactly that’s why they should’ve been targeted the most. Yet not only did they survive the Wen Sect’s visit, they remained completely untouched by the Wen. Wonder why?” He cocked an eyebrow.

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a thoughtful look. Jin Ling’s logic made sense, however...

“Su MuShi was afraid of the Wen. If his brother made a deal with them, wouldn’t he have been reassured?”

“Who said he knew about the deal?” Jin Ling frowned at him. “I’ve heard that while Su MuShi is soft-hearted and more flare than action on the outside, he handles his personal affairs much more strictly. Su She is a coward. If he just suspects his brother wouldn’t approve of the deal with the Wen Sect, naturally, he wouldn’t tell him about it.”

“This is just a theory, yes?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows and Jin Ling shrugged.

“Who else could’ve drawn the map to Wen Chao? I won’t underestimate my uncle, but he’d never seen the back mountains, much less walked them to figure out a safe route. Nobody else would’ve survived.”

“What about Wen Chao’s spy birds?” Lan JingYi chimed in.

“Wen Chao was so generous, saying his spy birds saw and heard everything, yet they didn’t find nor the Yin Iron, nor ZeWu-Jun and JingYi when they were hiding.” Jin Ling frowned. “Besides, has anyone been to Wuye?”

“I escaped there and Lan SiZhui went up there when they reclaimed Cloud Recesses.”

“But neither of you said the route or drew a map, right?” They both shook their heads. “Then here’s your answer.”

“I see...” Lan SiZhui hummed, deep in thought. It was quiet for a long moment. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with Lan JingYi, debating how to bring up what he wanted to talk about. However, unlike many other times, Lan JingYi didn’t seem to understand his intentions and just looked back questioningly. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and turned to Jin Ling.

“Jin Ling. Wen RuoHan said something I wanted to ask you about. Since Senior Wei is your uncle, you might know this. You might not, so I don’t blame you if you don’t, and it’s possible that it’s not real anyways, so...”

“Just ask already.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “But don’t expect me to know. I don’t actually know all that much about him as you think.”

Lan SiZhui nodded, expecting this. “Wen RuoHan said that in order for someone to become grandmaster in demonic cultivation, they had to lose their Core. The theory makes sense, since resentful energy is not compatible with a Core.” He gestured at himself and Lan JingYi, who nodded. Jin Ling watched them with wide eyes and swallowed thickly. “I don’t remember much about him from that time and I was still a child, so my memories might deceive me. Did Wei WuXian ever lose his Core in the original time?” Jin Ling just stared at them, then suddenly jumped on his feet turning to look out the window so his back was to them, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Why are you even asking?” He huffed. “Does it even matter anymore?” His tone was defensive and Lan SiZhui thought he might’ve offended Jin Ling somehow.

“Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” He said quietly. “I was just curious if this was true. If it is, then it should be best if he didn’t practice demonic cultivation again, since now he has his Core. But maybe he had it back then, too, and I’m just being paranoid.”

“You are!” Jin Ling snapped without looking back at them. “It doesn’t matter. Wei WuXian has his sword, so if he doesn’t use demonic cultivation, even then he has that.”

“That’s... exactly what SiZhui said.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Why are you so pissy about this? It was just a question. It’s not like we accused him to be the worst cultivator ever.”

“Well, he isn’t.” Jin Ling spun around and glared at Lan JingYi. “So, don’t even bring any of this up anymore.” With this, he turned and marched out of the room, slamming the door shut behind himself. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi watched the door for a long moment, then shared a look.

“What’s his problem? What offended him now?”

“I don’t know.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “Let’s just forget it.”

“Mn.” Lan JingYi nodded, then looked towards Hudie. “Hey, do you want me to play *Cleansing* for you?”

“Is it wise to use Hudie?” Lan SiZhui worried his lip between his teeth. He had no idea what effect the Stygian Tiger Amulet had on his guqin and he hadn’t been able to test it out yet, so he wasn’t sure it was wise for anyone to use it.

“Why wouldn’t it? It’s not like it’s a resentful tool now. It’s just Hudie, it’s fine!”

“I guess.” Lan SiZhui made a face and nodded. He figured if he would sense any resentful energy from Hudie, he could always tell Lan JingYi to stop. Lan JingYi picked up the guqin, laying it on the table.

“Ah, I haven’t played in more than a year.” Lan JingYi muttered. Musical cultivation was always Lan SiZhui’s primary tool, Lan JingYi was more adept with the sword and talismans. While he learned and practiced musical cultivation as much as any other Lan disciple, it wasn’t his first choice and because of that, he wasn’t the... best at it.

“Then... Maybe I should play instead?” Lan SiZhui asked, slightly worried about Lan JingYi’s memory to recall the right notes.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’ve practiced it for years. I just need to remember what comes after the first five notes.” He said with a happy little grin, then laid his fingers on the strings. Lan SiZhui winced when the first note sounded up.

“Ah, seventh dot.” He corrected out of reflex.

“Right. I knew.” Lan JingYi adjusted his thumb and Lan SiZhui closed his eyes, took a deep breath and prepared for a long afternoon.

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“Are you sure we should go?” Lan JingYi asked the third time as they closed the doors behind themselves. Lan SiZhui sighed softly.

“JingYi, if you don’t want to come—”

“It’s not that!” Lan JingYi quickly denied. “It’s just that, you’re still injured.”

“So are you, so are many others who had been at the battle. Should I skip this while everyone else attends?”

“I know.” Lan JingYi sighed. “I just worry. Wei WuXian wasn’t very trusted because of his demonic cultivation, and you... Well, you controlled the Yin Iron. People will fear that.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui agreed. “But Senior Wei faced them anyways. It is unbecoming of me to run away.”

“Well, at least we will be there to defend you. Lan XiChen said as well.”

“And I appreciate it, but when I chose this path, I knew there would be consequences.” He said with a small smile as they headed towards the reception hall. “If this will cause too much trouble for ZeWu-Jun, I know what I need to do.”

“Don’t say that! Saying things like this brings bad luck. How about we think positively?”

“Most certainly.” Lan SiZhui chuckled. They reached the courtyard leading to the reception hall and spotted white-clothed disciples standing around, seemingly waiting for something. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged a look, then hurried to stand amongst them. When Lan XiChen spotted them though, he turned to them with a smile. Next to him, Lan WangJi’s expression was cold.

“Ah, you’ve made it.” Lan XiChen said.

“Sect Leader Lan, Hanguang-Jun.” They bowed to the two.

“Then we’re all here. Let us go, WangJi.” He told his brother, who nodded.

“You were waiting for us?” Lan JingYi blinked, surprised.

“We wanted to make sure you arrived with your Sect of course.” Lan XiChen cocked an eyebrow at him. Lan JingYi shifted uncomfortably.

“Ah, thanks, ZeWu-Jun.”

“Let’s go then.” He said, then the Lan disciples shuffled into orderly rows, with Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi in the front. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi were unsure where to stand, but the other disciples decided for them and lined up behind them, so they were the ones directly behind Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi.

They went up the stairs, Lan SiZhui’s hand tightening on Yingjiu. The last time he’d seen this palace, many people died. He remembered, at the bottom of the stairs was where he killed Wen ZhuLiu. On top of the stairs him and Wei WuXian duetted to calm the puppets. As he glanced at the doors leading inside, he remembered coming with Lan JingYi, sharing a look before they entered, unsure if this was the day they would die.

After they entered the greeting chamber, Lan SiZhui noted the heavy wooden doors were open, allowing a glance inside the reception hall. It was so different than last time they were here. The tapestries that hung there previously were gone, or maybe just covered with the rich, red material that covered the windows now. The firepit was still there, right behind where Jin GuangShan and Jin GuangYao stood. Last time Lan SiZhui had seen it, the Yin Iron shards floated above it. A chill ran down Lan SiZhui’s back as he glanced at the throne, remembering several moments; when he first saw Wen RuoHan and felt like an incompetent child, when he picked up the Yin Iron and used it to stop Wen Chao, to control and torture him.

“Hey.” Lan JingYi suddenly grabbed his hand and Lan SiZhui flinched, his hand going to his waist, but he remembered himself in time and lowered it from his qiankun pouch. “You’re very pale. Are you sure you don’t want to go back?” Lan SiZhui shook his head silently, for they reached Jin GuangShan and the Jiang Sect, stopping next to them.

Only when they prepared to bow did he notice he had a handful of Lan JingYi’s sleeve in his hand, probably grabbed it unconsciously while his memories resurfaced. They bowed to Jin GuangShan, then to Jiang FengMian.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, it’s good that you could come.” Jin GuangShan smiled at him. Lan SiZhui found his tone soft and his voice soothing.

“It’s no problem. Excuse us for being late.”

“May I inquire why you were so late? All the guests are waiting for the three major Sect to arrive.” Lan SiZhui’s eyebrows furrowed. Jin GuangShan sounded rather superior, as if he was chiding Lan XiChen. Lan XiChen hesitated with the answer.

“Sect Leader Jin, I’m sure Sect Leader Lan also had many injured in the battle. It is natural he would arrive a little later than expected.” Jiang FengMian cut in politely, yet obviously disapproving of Jin GuangShan’s tone. “As you know, A-Xian and A-Cheng and myself were also wounded in the battle and we needed a bit more time to prepare, that’s why we were also late.”

Lan SiZhui chanced a glance over to the Jiang, and found Wei WuXian also looking at him. When their gazes met, Wei WuXian smiled at him and nodded his head in greeting. Lan SiZhui bowed his head as well.

“Indeed.” Lan XiChen said with a rather heavy exhale. Before he continued, however, Nie MingJue was announced and Lan XiChen visibly relaxed as he directed his disciples to the side to give space to the Nie Sect. They all bowed to each other, then Jin GuangShan addressed Nie MingJue.

“Sect Leader Nie, it’s good to see you’re feeling better.”

“Yes.” Nie MingJue nodded. “The Jin Sect’s healers are indeed talented.” He said tersely.

“I’m glad to hear they were of help.” Jin GuangShan nodded with a pleased smile.

“Ah, Sect Leader Nie, as the commander in charge of the Sunshot Campaign, please, take a seat.” Jin GuangYao said with a honeyed smile, gesturing towards the throne of Wen RuoHan. As Lan SiZhui looked over, once again he saw the ghost of Wen RuoHan walking down towards him, an interested gleam in his eye. He still remembered the weight of the oppressing aura of the Yin Iron, and how scared he was.

“Jin GuangYao. Wen RuoHan tortured several of the present company from that seat. How can you suggest that I ever take that seat or willingly see anyone in it? If it was up to me, I’d have the whole palace burned to the ground.” Nie MingJue said with a sharp, cold look. There was an awkward pause, then Jin GuangShan chuckled.

“Sect Leader Nie, please, forgive my son. We’ve just discovered he’s my long-lost son and he still misunderstands me sometimes. Naturally, we have other seats arranged for everyone. Please.” He gestured and Nie MingJue nodded. “Servants.” Jin GuangShan nodded and servants stepped forward, bowing then gesturing to the Sect Leaders the way. Jin GuangShan left with Nie MingJue, while Jin GuangYao stayed where he was, smile frozen on his face. Lan JingYi leaned over.

“Shouldn’t we say something?” Lan SiZhui just shook his head in answer. They had time to deal with Jin GuangYao. They followed Lan XiChen to the tables arranged for the Lan Sect. However, when Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi wanted to sit in their usual seats behind the Twin Jades, the servant leading them there stepped closer, stuttering.

“Ah, Young Heroes, please. Sect Leader Jin arranged that ChunYu-Jun and Feng CiKe sit here.” He gestured at the tables beside Lan XiChen’s. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged a look.

“And if we refuse?” Lan JingYi asked curiously.

“Please, Young Heroes, don’t do that. This lowly one doesn’t know how to deal with that.”

“Okay.” Lan JingYi shrugged and stepped over to sit at that table. At Lan SiZhui’s look, he blinked. “What? I don’t want to cause trouble to the servants. They just follow orders.”

“You hate sitting up front though.” Lan SiZhui commented as he settled in the seat next to Lan JingYi’s.

“Because Grandmaster Lan loves to make me pay attention by hitting me. I don’t have an issue with the seat, I have an issue with the teacher.”

“It is truly remarkable how... different you are, JingYi, from the rest of the Sect.” Lan XiChen commented from the side with an amused smile.

“It’s not my fault.” Lan JingYi shrugged. “I grew up in Moling, so my manners are bad. Besides, Lan SiZhui lets me get away with so much, he truly spoils me.”

“You’re truly like brothers.” Lan XiChen nodded. Next to him, Lan WangJi seemed completely disinterested in the conversation, eyes fixed on the Jiang Sect across them. Jiang YanLi sat at the table which Lan JingYi crashed into from Wen Chao’s first attack. Two seats over, Jiang Cheng sat at the one where Lan SiZhui fell.

“SiZhui, are you really sure you’re fine?” Lan JingYi nudged him with his elbow and Lan SiZhui shook his head, looking over. “Have you even heard a word?”

“Sorry.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I’m just a little...” He trailed off, unsure how to phrase it.

“It’s my fault.” Lan XiChen said, and Lan SiZhui looked over with a frown. He also saw Lan WangJi turning to his brother with a stern look. “I forgot you haven’t been back here since then. If you wish, the banquet hasn’t started yet. You can step out.”



“Ah.” Lan SiZhui blinked, then nodded. “I’ll take ZeWu-Jun up on that offer then.”

“No problem.” Lan XiChen smiled at him, understanding.

“Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui halted as he got on his feet and looked over at Lan WangJi. “Do you need *Cleansing*?”

“Ah, Hanguang-Jun, it’s fine.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, grateful that finally he could use Lan WangJi’s title to address him. He was so used to it, after they’ve returned to the past it was hard to address him as anything else. Now that Lan WangJi also officially gained the title courtesy of his efforts during the Sunshot campaign, it was refreshing to call him Hanguang-Jun again. “I’m just a bit overwhelmed, it’s not because of the resentful energy.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi hummed, then turned back to stare at the crowd. Lan SiZhui bowed to them shallowly, then walked past them and out of the room. Once outside, the warm summer night breeze felt good on his skin and he took in a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air. When he opened his eyes, he noticed movement from the side and looked over, seeing Wei WuXian splayed out on the stairs, a jar of wine in his hand. He appeared to be admiring the stars. Lan SiZhui hesitated, then went over and quietly sat an arm length away from him. Wei WuXian noticed the movement and looked over, his expression brightening as he saw Lan SiZhui.

“SiZhui! ChunYu-Jun graced me with his presence. How lucky I am!” He teased with a little smirk. Lan SiZhui huffed, amused.

“Young Master Wei, you only need to ask and I’ll gladly join you.”

“Will you?” Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows and held out the jar. Lan SiZhui made a face.

“To keep you company, I mean.”

“I thought so.” Wei WuXian chuckled, swinging the jar and drinking a long pull from it.

“Young Master Wei, may I ask why you’re out here, drinking alone, while the everyone is inside, celebrating?”

“Mm...” Wei WuXian pouted his lips as if he was thinking, looking down at the jar, tilting his head to the side. “Because we’ve been through so much, and you still refuse to call me Wei WuXian.”

“It’s unbecoming.”

“Why would it be? We’re both orphans and we were both taken in by renowned Sects to teach us their arts. We’re equally matched in most things. For once, when I address you informally, I’m not even being rude, yet you refuse to address me like that. I’m starting to think you don’t like me!” Wei WuXian pouted at him.

“Ah, that’s not the case at all, Young Master Wei!” Lan SiZhui denied immediately. “It’s just... You remind me of someone I used to know and respect greatly. He was also my senior, so because of that, I have a hard time addressing you informally.”

“Can a person be judged by how much they resemble someone else?” Wei WuXian hummed. “Whoever this was, I’m not him.” He gave Lan SiZhui a flat look and Lan SiZhui felt embarrassed. “If you don’t want to address me like that, then that’s fine. But I’m not the same person, okay?”

“Of course.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Lan SiZhui...” Wei WuXian began slowly. “You’re not mad at me, are you?” He asked, peering over at him. Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Why would I be mad?”

“A lot of people seem to be mad at me lately.” Wei WuXian chuckled, but it was not amused.

“Young Master Wei... Brother Wei.” He settled and Wei WuXian gave him a wide, pleased smile at this. Lan SiZhui returned it, though his was smaller. Then it faded. “Brother Wei, how long have you been practicing demonic cultivation?”

Wei WuXian pressed his lips together and tilted his head the other way, his brows furrowing. “Does it matter? It saved many lives.”

“Is it since we met in YiLing after I got out of the Burial Mounds?”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian hummed grimly.

“Did you use this method to move the war along when you were stuck near Yunmeng and I went to save Wen Qing and Wen Ning?”

“There was no choice. They kept defying us.”

“I’m not looking for reasons or excuses.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I’m just asking.”

“Why are you asking then?” Wei WuXian cocked an eyebrow as he looked over.

“Call it curiosity?” Lan SiZhui shrugged. “Is this why you and Young Master Jiang fought over the past few months?” Wei WuXian sighed and nodded.

“Jiang Cheng doesn’t want me to use it. And I haven’t much! A few times during the war, when I thought this was better than letting people die.”

“Was he the only one to know?”

Wei WuXian nodded. “I trusted him not to tell anyone. He was actually mad at *you*.” Wei WuXian pulled his mouth. “He thought you taught me. You didn’t even know I was practicing; how could you have taught me?” He mumbled, as if for only himself.

“I see...” Lan SiZhui hummed. “Brother Wei... Will you let me examine you?”

“What for? Healers had been examining me since Uncle Jiang returned and heard about it.” He huffed. “Hua Qing is actually terrifying when they need a patient to cooperate. It’s like

they see right through your biggest insecurity and play it against you.”

“I just want to confirm something if you don’t mind?” He held out a hand, and Wei WuXian shrugged, placing his wrist into it. Lan SiZhui concentrated on Wei WuXian’s meridians and pulse.

“So?” Wei WuXian asked. “Am I dying?”

“Don’t joke about that.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, then dropped his wrist, finding nothing wrong. “You’re fine.”

“That’s what the healers are telling me!” Wei WuXian nodded with a pleased smile. Then he leaned forward to catch Lan SiZhui’s eyes. “What did you expect to find?”

“Nothing.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, smiling at the other. Wei WuXian shrugged and leaned back against the stairs. “You still haven’t told me why you’re out here, instead of enjoying the celebration.”

“I told you it’s because I thought you didn’t like me!” Wei WuXian grinned. Lan SiZhui pointedly raised his eyebrows and he pouted. “It would be a good reason. Tell me instead, why are *you* here? After all, you’re a celebrated hero of the Sunshot Campaign.”

Lan SiZhui felt a shiver run down his back at those words, looking out over the main courtyard. How many had lost their lives there, while Lan SiZhui did what? Dueled with Wen ZhuLiu and played some music with Wei WuXian before disappearing into the palace, the very same room the others sat now, enjoying conversation on the same place Lan SiZhui tortured a man.

“War is not glorious.” He said quietly, looking down. “Killing shouldn’t be celebrated.”

“Lan SiZhui, if we didn’t kill them, they would’ve killed us.” Wei WuXian said with a heavy sigh. “If you think about it this way, you’ll just end up torturing yourself and driving yourself crazy.”

“I know we had no other choice.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “And if I had to, I’d do it again. But does that mean it should be celebrated and should we be called heroes?”

“Why not?” Wei WuXian hummed. “When we killed the Tortoise with Lan Zhan, we were also heroes. Is that also gruesome?”

“Killing a creature that cannot be reasoned with is different.” Lan SiZhui paused. “Although it could be argued that it was only its nature and it couldn’t help but wanting to kill you and for that, were you right to kill it? Would a bull be excused for killing a tiger that wants to feed on it?”

“Lan SiZhui.” Wei WuXian put a hand on his shoulder and Lan SiZhui looked over. “There are things in this life you cannot find answers to, for there are no right answers. It’s better if you don’t think about them and live a carefree life as long as you can.” They watched each other, then Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes.

“Mn.” He nodded.

“What is really bothering you?” Wei WuXian asked. “It’s surely not that we’re celebrating our survival, since you also said you’d do it again if you had to. What is it? Is it what Wen Chao said before the battle began? Everyone saw that you’ve worked hard on our side. By now, you cannot find one person here who would say you worked for the Wen.”

“That’s not it. Ah, forget it, Brother Wei. It’s a question that also doesn’t have an answer, so I shouldn’t think about and live a carefree life.” He smiled at the other. Wei WuXian, surprisingly, didn’t smile back.

“You know you can confide in me, right? I might be loud and noisy, but if you need to unburden yourself, I will listen and keep it safe.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him fondly and Wei WuXian finally returned it.

“Good. It’s good to see you smile. You’ve been so serious these past few months, I’ve started thinking you became another Lan WangJi.” He chuckled. Lan SiZhui huffed, looking away. “There is a lot for us to talk about.” Wei WuXian mentioned. “But for tonight, let the wine take away our worries and thank the heavens we’re alive. We need not to celebrate the deaths of the Wen, but we need to celebrate being alive and make an oath, that as long as we’re alive, we will always help the helpless and bring justice to the wrongdoers.” He pushed himself onto his feet and lifted his jar of wine with both hands towards the sky. “Lan SiZhui, we might walk the crooked path, but as long as we’re alive, we will never use it to bring harm to those who do not deserve it. What do you say? Will you toast to the heavens with me?”

Lan SiZhui chuckled, shaking his head and standing as well. “This once.” He said and Wei WuXian grinned at him, then turned to look behind them.

“What about you, brothers, Lan Zhan, Jiang Cheng?” He called out. Lan SiZhui blinked at him, confused.

“You cannot toast with one jar.” Came Jiang Cheng’s voice and Lan SiZhui turned back to see his friends leaning against the wall of the palace some steps away from the entrance while Lan WangJi and Jiang Cheng seemed to have just arrived.

“I have one here.” Jin Ling pushed himself away from the wall, a jar in his own hand, Lan JingYi following closely. Wei WuXian and Lan SiZhui joined them on top of the stairs.

The six of them shared a look, then Wei WuXian grinned. “Lan Zhan, let’s make a toast.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded and Wei WuXian’s grin widened. He raised his jar, so did Jin Ling. Jiang Cheng cocked an eyebrow. Wei WuXian and Jin Ling nodded to each other, then drank. As they were done, Jin Ling made a disgusted face wiping his mouth as he passed the jar to Lan JingYi. Lan SiZhui took the offered jar from Wei WuXian and with less flare, drank a tiny sip. Lan JingYi passed his jar to Jiang Cheng, who frowned, but drank without a comment. Lan SiZhui handed the jar back and Wei WuXian held it out to Lan WangJi.

“Perhaps it’s better if he toasts with tea instead, Young Master Wei.” Came Lan XiChen’s voice from the doorway as well. As they turned to look at him, he approached, two cups in his hands. He handed one to Lan WangJi, then stepped back. Lan WangJi nodded to him gratefully, then inclined his head towards Wei WuXian before finishing the cup. They all turned to Lan XiChen. “If these Young Heroes are finished with their toasts, let us go inside. Jin GuangShan wants to begin and many want to toast to you six.”

Wei WuXian laughed at that. “Young Heroes? ZeWu-Jun, if we’re heroes, then we’re the Six Heroes of the Sunshot Campaign.” He said with a mischievous little smirk. Lan XiChen inclined his head.

“Of course. Then would the Six Heroes of the Sunshot Campaign please come inside?”

“If ZeWu-Jun asks so nicely, naturally, we will go.” Wei WuXian said, clearly restraining his laughter. Lan XiChen also smiled widely, fondly, and gestured them towards the reception hall.

Inside, everyone was still in their seats, but from the way some of them were still adjusting their robes, Lan SiZhui suspected they were mingling and talking while the six of them were outside. The Lan returned to their seats and from across the room, they saw Wei WuXian settle between Jiang YanLi and Jiang Cheng, who leaned over to ask something. Wei WuXian laughed at that, patting Jiang Cheng’s arm. From their expressions, Lan SiZhui suspected Wei WuXian was teasing Jiang Cheng, who was annoyed at it.

“Everyone, please, settle down!” Jin GuangShan called and the hall quieted. He sat under the throne at a low table, while the rest of his Sect sat next to the Lan, Jin Ling looking entirely disinterested and watching Jin GuangYao next to him fixedly.

“Many Sects gathered together to crusade against the Wen Sect. The success of the Sunshot Campaign owes its gratitude to the Nie Sect of Qinghe, the Lan Sect of Gusu, and the Jiang Sect of Yunmeng. Today, I’ll drink first to show my respect to you.” Jin GuangShan said, holding a bowl of alcohol in his hand. Everyone stood at that, many agreeing and cheering at this. Lan SiZhui also stood, holding up his tea. He looked over at Wei WuXian, who didn’t stand out from his siblings for once, paying proper attention with proper posture. Jin GuangShan drank and everyone followed his example.

“Everybody. Please sit down.” Jin GuangShan prompted and sat. As Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui did as well, Lan JingYi leaned over to whisper:

“Why is he acting like the host?” Lan SiZhui shook his head discreetly to show he didn’t know. “Jin Ling said he was arrogant, but I didn’t really believe him. With a father like this, how can we be surprised that Jin ZiXuan is also this arrogant, and that Jin Ling also ended up being arrogant?”

“Wen RuoHan and him were close allies. Perhaps he feels bad for not seeing his flaws earlier and that’s why he’s hosting to make up for it.” Lan SiZhui said equally as quiet.

“He didn’t see what everyone had known since before the indoctrination, that Wen RuoHan was arrogant and power-hungry?” Lan JingYi shook his head. “Mark my words, he wants to

become Chief Cultivator, taking advantage of the battled state of the three Sects.”

“Do you remember how the Jin Sect earned that title in the past?” Lan SiZhui asked, thinking about that.

“It was because his Sect suffered the least losses and the other Sects were unsuited for the title and Nie MingJue rejected it.” Lan JingYi said. Lan SiZhui nodded, then Jin GuangShan began talking again, so they turned their attention back to him.

“Everybody, I have always been concerned about something. It was inappropriate for me to mention it before because of the Campaign. Now the disturbance has been settled and I have no worries anymore. Luckily, all of you are here today, so I hope everyone can be a witness. Sect Leader Jiang, we’ve always been as close as brothers. Our wives have also been as close as sisters.

“ZiXuan has been engaged to Lady Jiang since their childhood, but because of some misunderstandings, we called it off. Such a pity! But now it’s been a year and we’ve all seen how fragile the cultivation world really is. I would blame myself if anything happened to you, Sect Leader Jiang, but I would blame myself even more if – forgive my words – it came to it and I couldn’t look after your daughter. Sect Leader Jiang, to prevent a fallout as we’ve had with the Wen Sect, how about we clear the air and reconsider strengthening our connection by marriage? Our Sects would always stand by each other, so a conflict like this wouldn’t happen again.”

All around the room, several smaller Clan Leaders loudly agreed, saying it was a good thing and a marriage would grant some well-deserved good news after a long war.

“Sect Leader Jin.” Jiang FengMian said after a long pause and everyone hushed. “As we’ve discussed in the past, marriage is a lifelong matter. This shouldn’t be decided between two Sects, but instead between the two people whose marriage we’re talking about. I’ve asked A-Li in the past, which is why I called off the engagement in the first place. But times change and naturally, minds can change as well. If A-Li wants the marriage, I shall grant her wish and do everything in my power to make this possible. But if she doesn’t want it, I cannot force it.”

“Ah, you’re right, you’re right, of course.” Jin GuangShan chuckled stiffly. “We should listen to Lady Jiang’s opinion on this as well.” He gestured to Jiang YanLi, who seemed embarrassed to be called out in front of everyone. She looked over at her father, who inclined his head. Jiang YanLi stood elegantly, then bowed to Jin GuangShan.

“Sect Leader Jin, we appreciate your kindness. However, the war has just ended and there are many matters to attend to at home. I’m afraid this time isn’t good for me to get married.”

“Lady Jiang, naturally, a marriage would be good news and would cheer up the people.” One of the smaller Clan Leaders sitting behind the Jiang Sect said. “Just accept it.” He said with the well-intention of a grandfather but with the arrogance of Jin GuangShan. As he watched him, Lan SiZhui had to realize he was looking at Sect Leader Yao, only much younger than when he knew him.

“He was annoying back then, he’s annoying in the future as well.” Lan JingYi whispered Lan SiZhui, who nudged him back to his seat from where he leaned over, with a small smile.

“Sect Leader Jin, I’m very grateful for your kindness.” Jiang YanLi saluted to him again. “It is my fault for rejecting it. Please, forgive me.” Jin GuangShan pressed his lips together and didn’t seem to know what to say.

Suddenly, a loud noise came from the Jin Sect’s tables and as they looked over, they saw Jin Ling jumping on his feet, glaring at Jiang YanLi, then he turned and stormed out of the hall. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look.

“You go. It was my turn last time.” Lan JingYi told him.

“Last time nobody went.” He remembered when Jin Ling got upset because Lan SiZhui asked him about Wei WuXian’s Golden Core. “You keep score?” Lan SiZhui frowned at him, the thought just occurring to him. He truly didn’t even remember when was the last time Jin Ling got so upset he stormed out of a room, before the other day.

“I have to, with him.” Lan JingYi said. Lan SiZhui shook his head and turned to Lan XiChen. However, the Lan Sect Leader was already looking at him and subtly shook his head, so Lan SiZhui stayed put. Several people leaned together to whisper, pointing towards the Jin Sect’s tables. From behind them, Lan SiZhui heard the MolingSu disciples also whisper to each other:

“Why is MouShi so upset over this?”

“Maybe he’s the one in love with Jiang YanLi and her saying it is not a good time for marriage tempers with his plans.”

“Can’t be. Why would he be upset over a rejection then? If Jiang YanLi accepted, then he would become jealous and upset, but like this, he has no reason.”

“Then maybe he hoped to celebrate Young Master Jin’s marriage. I’ve heard him and MouShi became close in the past few months while they battled together. They might’ve become sworn brothers and Lady Jiang’s rejection hurt him because he’s a very caring person.”

“You’re right, you’re right. I also heard MouShi and Young Master Jin work together on the battlefield as two brothers who had trained together all their lives. I’ve also heard MouShi had used Young Master Jin’s sword to kill Wen Chao. If Young Master Jin allowed him to take his sword, just how close they must be? It must be because they’re so close that MouShi is upset on his behalf. While Young Master Jin cannot afford to show his emotions, MouShi is known for his quick and hot temper.”

“That’s right. His parents died a horrible death I heard. He must be hurting to see a love story like this fall apart.”

“That’s true, that’s true.”

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged another look, then movement from the Jin Sect's table drew the attention once again as Jin GuangYao stood.

"Father." He inquired subtly, and Jin GuangShan gestured him to talk. He bowed to his father, then to the room. "Dear friends." He addressed the whole hall. "Please, excuse MouShi, for he had been through a lot these past few months and came to care greatly for Young Master Jin. As for the marriage, the renowned Jiang Sect should be satisfied for having such an excellent daughter. She is soft spoken, humble and considerate. Naturally, all major Sects had suffered losses because of the Sunshot Campaign against the Wen Sect. Sect Leader Jin, my father, would not be so bold to suggest a decision to be made right away. He merely wished to open this topic for discussion again, so that in the future our families can settle this matter between ourselves and hopefully strengthen our relationship by marriage."

"Such a sweet-talker." Lan JingYi grumbled.

"How did he come to be recognized by his father this time?" Lan SiZhui whispered to him. During this, all around them the Clan leaders agreed loudly.

"Lan XiChen told Jin GuangShan and Nie MingJue he was the spy who helped them from within Nightless City and Jin GuangYao was also officially recognized as one of the heroes of the Sunshot Campaign." Lan JingYi filled him in.

"So, just like last time." Lan SiZhui concluded and Lan JingYi shrugged.

"I don't know about that, but yes, that sounds correct."

"Thank you, A-Yao." Jin GuangShan nodded to his son, who then bowed to him and sat down. "Friends, with this matter closed, I'd like to say another toast." He stood. "There are many heroes of the Sunshot Campaign, it would be hard to name them all. Most of them I've already talked to and congratulated on their efforts. Unfortunately, there were some of them who got injured and I didn't have the opportunity to greet. Since we're all here, why don't we toast to each of them together, to recognize their efforts?" He smiled and everyone agreed. On one hand, Lan SiZhui was grateful he wouldn't have to listen to this from everyone individually, but at the same time, he felt uncomfortable being celebrated like this.

"First, naturally MouShi, who didn't only protect my son as a brother would, but also killed the tyrant, Wen Chao. He is not here to receive our toast, but let us recognize his talent." Everyone agreed and cheered. "My sons from the Jin Sect also deserve recognition for all the hard work they did. Let us toast." He inclined his head towards Jin ZiXuan and Jin GuangYao. Then, he turned to the Nie Sect. "MingJue, unfortunately you also have been injured, but now you're here. Let us toast to the commander in charge!" Cheers sounded all around. Nie MingJue nodded tersely. Jin GuangShan turned to the Jiang Sect next.

"Many would agree that the Twin Prides of Yunmeng also saved countless lives on the battlefield, and even when their father and benefactor was injured, they did not back down from the challenge and led their disciples into battle fearlessly. I toast to you as well." Jiang FengMian inclined his head and Jiang Cheng smiled tightly at Jin GuangShan, while Wei WuXian just looked on, disinterested. Then, Jin GuangShan turned to the Lan.



“It is without doubt that the Lan Sect had risen from its ashes, but instead of becoming the phoenix,” he gestured at the symbol behind him, “they ended its regime. ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun, ChunYu-Jun, Feng CiKe, I am honored to call you brothers in arms. I toast to you and pray for your full recoveries.” He gave a little bow and the Lan all inclined their heads, though Lan SiZhui didn’t toast, eyes fixed on the table in front of him. Everyone cheered multiple times, then cups were emptied. As soon as the toast was over, Jin ZiXuan stood, and bowing to his father, turned and left the room.

“How arrogant, calling us out like that.” Lan JingYi muttered under his breath, refilling his cup with tea. “If he wanted to recognize us properly, he wouldn’t have waited for a public occasion to gain sympathy despite not having done anything during the Campaign.”

“You understand politics more by the day.” Lan SiZhui mentioned, distracted, as he was watching the two-headed phoenix and the throne.

“MouShi talks about it so much, it is not my intention to understand. I just do.” Lan JingYi said. After a long pause, Lan SiZhui still couldn’t take his eyes off the throne.

“Feng CiKe...” Lan SiZhui tried out, but found the name didn’t come to him naturally. Lan JingYi looked up from where he was pouring tea for him as well and followed Lan SiZhui’s line of sight. He sighed.

“It’s just a stupid title. The people don’t want to name the hero, because then he’ll have a face. But if they give him a title, he can be anyone they imagine. Since you want to talk to me and not anyone else, just keep calling me JingYi, okay?”

“Okay.” Lan SiZhui said quietly, and as their gazes met, he smiled at Lan JingYi. The other then suddenly looked over Lan SiZhui’s head, and nodded towards the door. Lan SiZhui turned to look as well, seeing Jin ZiXuan and Jin Ling walking in side-by-side. Jin Ling looked annoyed, Jin ZiXuan indifferent.

“You think they talked?” Lan JingYi asked.

“I hope so.” Lan XiChen said from next to them. “Jin Ling had not been the most... cooperative with Jin GuangYao. Him defying his family so openly is not good for their relationship.”

“Neither is holding a string to my throat and threatening to kill me.” Jin Ling said from where he stood in front of their tables. Lan XiChen furrowed his brows in confusion, but Jin Ling waved him off.

“So, did the two of you talk? You didn’t say anything, did you?” Lan JingYi looked up at him.

“Don’t take me for an idiot, Feng CiKe. He told me this was none of my business and to come back to show my support to the family I belong to.”

“And what did you say to that?” Lan JingYi hummed.

“Nothing.” Jin Ling shrugged. “I just followed him inside, so hopefully he will leave me alone now.”

“That’s not very nice to say about your sworn brother.” Lan JingYi teased.

“You—! What sworn brother, what nonsense are you sprouting?!” Jin Ling hissed, leaning close.

“Didn’t you hear?” Lan JingYi also leaned forward to say quietly, selling the act by visibly looking around, then lifting his hand to cup against his mouth. “People say you care about Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan’s marriage because during the Sunshot Campaign, the two of you became extremely close and sworn brotherhood to each other. Since you’re a caring and sensitive person who likes a good love story, you’re extremely upset Jiang YanLi rejected the marriage.”

“Who says such bullshit?!” Jin Ling exclaimed. Thankfully, by then everyone started mingling again, so his voice wasn’t overly obvious in the crowd.

“Ah, Young Brother Jin, please, don’t shout and use such words. It is unbecoming to the Jin Sect.” Came a new voice and the Lan stood to bow to Jin GuangShan as he walked up to them. He held up a hand and smiled at them, putting a hand on Jin Ling’s shoulder. “ZeWu-Jun, I apologize if my young disciple disturbed you.”

“Sect Leader Jin, Jin Ling is a good friend of both me and my disciples, I do not mind his presence.” Lan XiChen said, smiling at Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes and looked away.

“ZeWu-Jun is very kind to say that.” Jin GuangShan nodded with a disbelieving smile. He then turned to Lan SiZhui. “ChunYu-Jun is looking better by the day.” Lan SiZhui ignored he had never even met Jin GuangShan, much less saw him in the past few days and bowed.

“Thank you, Sect Leader Jin.”

“Mn. I’ve heard of your bravery during the last battle.”

“Sect Leader Jin flatters me. I’ve only done what was expected of me.”

“Of course, ZeWu-Jun’s favored disciple would be humble.” Jin GuangShan chuckled. “A-Yao tells me you dueled with Wen RuoHan rather fiercely, he was very impressed by your displays of power. I’m surprised to see you up and around so soon afterwards.”

Lan SiZhui’s smile froze at the implication. His heart pounded in his chest. If Jin GuangYao saw their battle, what else did he see... hear?! Did he also know the three of them were from the future?! He looked over and saw Jin GuangYao engaging in a conversation with some Jiang disciples. As if he sensed Lan SiZhui’s gaze on him, Jin GuangYao looked up, locking eyes with him. Then he smiled and inclined his head before turning back to the conversation. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure whether he imagined the smile looking rather sinister.

“SiZhui?” Lan JingYi nudged him and Lan SiZhui looked back, feeling faint. “Ah.” Lan JingYi’s eyes widened and he turned to Jin GuangShan. “Sect Leader Jin, Sect Leader Lan,

excuse us for the rudeness, but I think ChunYu-Jun is feeling unwell. If you don't mind, me and Jin Ling will escort him back to his rooms."

"ChunYu-Jun is unwell?" Jin GuangShan sounded surprised. "Of course. Please, take him back." He gestured towards the door and Lan JingYi took hold of Lan SiZhui's arm, tugging him up to be standing. He bowed shallowly, then went behind the others' table. As they walked past, Lan WangJi also stood.

"I'll go with." He bowed to his brother and Jin GuangShan, then followed the three of them as they exited the reception hall. Before they could go down the steps, Lan SiZhui halted and sat on the steps, curling up.

"SiZhui?!" Lan JingYi sat next to him, hugging his shoulder.

"Ah, Lan Zhan!" Came a shout behind them and heavy footsteps as someone approached. "Oh, there you are. I thought something was wrong, you left so quickly." Wei WuXian said.

"That bastard son of a whore!" Jin Ling suddenly exclaimed. "It's not enough that he tries to kill me once in another life, even now he's stirring up trouble!"

"This doesn't help!" Lan JingYi told him sternly. Jin Ling sat heavily next to Lan SiZhui.

"I know. But what can we do?" He fumed. "I thought with the war over, we finally catch a break. Yet here he is again, ruining my life."

"What are you two talking about? What's wrong with SiZhui?" Wei WuXian asked, confused.

"Wei WuXian!" Came Jiang Cheng's angry voice from behind. "What do you think you're doing, running out like this? You're causing a scene again."

"Jiang Cheng, something's wrong with Lan SiZhui. Didn't we swear brotherhood just now? How could I ignore him now?"

"It wasn't a proper ceremony, you just played around. We aren't sworn brothers. What's wrong with Lan SiZhui?" Jiang Cheng asked then.

"I'm fine." Lan SiZhui said, straightening up a little. "I'm fine." He repeated, looking over at Lan JingYi, who nodded, understanding.

"Why don't we go back to your rooms and talk?" Lan JingYi suggested, looking over at Jin Ling, who nodded grimly.

"No." Lan SiZhui shook his head. "I'm not feeling well. Can I just go back alone and rest a bit?"

"I'll play *Cleansing*." Lan WangJi said behind them. Lan SiZhui didn't look back, just nodded.

“I’ll join.” Wei WuXian chimed in right away. “If I’m serious about musical cultivation, I ought to learn a few songs. Right?” He sounded like he was grinning.

“SiZhui?” Lan JingYi asked and he nodded his consent. “Okay. We’ll stay and investigate then.” Lan JingYi said, looking over at Jin Ling. “Discreetly.” He added pointedly.

“Out of the two of us, who’s the noisier?” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Impossible.” Wei WuXian said. “You’re both incredibly noisy.”

“Nobody asked you.” Jin Ling looked back at him with a frown. There was no answer, Lan SiZhui suspected Wei WuXian shrugged his shoulders.

“What do I say to father and sister if you just leave like this?” Jiang Cheng sneered behind them.

“Tell them I’m busy otherwise.”

“They’ll think you’re practicing those wicked tricks again.”

“I’ll be with Lan Zhan and SiZhui. Between the two of them, how could I practice them?”

“Lan SiZhui also practices them. Or aren’t his scores the ones you use?”

“Not all, I also have my own songs.” Wei WuXian said nonchalantly. “But he discourages me anyways. There won’t be a problem. Don’t be so noisy, you too.”

“I’m not being noisy, I’m trying to look out for you, you idiot. Father is very angry with you. Why must you always cause trouble? Just leave Lan SiZhui alone and throw away that stupid thing. What if mother agrees with father on this matter and throws you out of the Sect? Do you not care about us at all? I told you to stop doing these wicked tricks in Yangzu, why can’t you listen to me just once? Now look at what you did. You make sister worry. You and father never disagree. Do you know how it’s like, being caught between the two of you? Leave him alone and stop this nonsense. We’ll return to Lotus Pier in a few days and you’re still playing that wretched flute of yours.”

“Jiang Cheng, how many times do I have to tell you? This is none of your business.” Wei WuXian replied coldly, his tone emotionless. “I’ll talk to Uncle Jiang when it’s suitable. Right now, my friend needs my help. Must you keep arguing with me even now?”

“You don’t listen to me, so perhaps it’s best if everyone knows what a big mess you’ve created. If you don’t listen to me, listen to them.”

“This is really not the right time, Jiang Cheng.” Wei WuXian huffed, annoyed. “Go back and tell Uncle Jiang and sister I’ll be back soon.”

“Lan Wangji.” Jiang Cheng began coldly. “I trust you to look after them and not allow them to keep conspiring.”

“Who’s conspiring?!” Wei WuXian exclaimed. “Lan SiZhui is not in the condition to play, me and Lan Zhan will just help him relax. Why don’t you ever trust me?”

“Because I know you.” Jiang Cheng snapped. “I’ll go back and tell father you’ll be back. Feel better, ChunYu-Jun.” With this, he turned and stomped back into the reception hall. Wei WuXian huffed, annoyed.

“Just ignore him. He’s been like this during the war, I think it’s the stress.” Nobody answered this.

“You two go back, too.” Lan WangJi told Lan JingYi and Jin Ling after a pause. “Reassure brother.”

“You sure you don’t want us to come with?” Jin Ling asked and Lan SiZhui nodded, smiling at him apologetically. “Alright then.” He stood, walking up the stairs. “Come on, JingYi, let’s figure out what my uncle wants to do now.”

“Must you shout that to the whole world to hear?!” Lan JingYi called after him as he, too, jumped on his feet. He stopped to bow quickly to Lan WangJi, then hurried after Jin Ling. “Hey, wait up, MouShi! I’m still injured, remember?!”

With this, their voices and footsteps blended into the crowd.

“Can you walk, or do you need us to carry you?” Wei WuXian stepped down the stairs to look him in the face. Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“I can walk.” He reassured and held out a hand to be helped up. As they walked towards the rooms behind the Scorching Sun Palace, Wei WuXian spoke up:

“So, Jin Ling’s uncle is here. I was finally in a room with him, yet I do not know who he is... Wait.” He paused. “Before you left, you were conversing with Jin GuangShan. Don’t tell me... Is he Jin Ling’s uncle?!” He looked at Lan SiZhui with wide eyes.

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “Brother Wei, there’s a good reason why we don’t want to reveal Jin Ling’s uncle’s identity. Please, don’t ask about this anymore.” He requested softly and Wei WuXian pouted.

“It is Jin GuangYao.” Lan WangJi told Wei WuXian and the three of them halted, Lan SiZhui looking over at him with wide eyes.

“Huh?” Wei WuXian also blinked at him, confused. At Lan WangJi’s look, he furrowed his brows and thought. Then suddenly, he snapped his fingers and looked up. “Jin Ling’s uncle’s identity is a secret. Jin Ling wrote in his letter his uncle went missing after we left Qinghe for the indoctrination, when Wen Chao attacked Unclear Realm, at the same time Meng Yao was sent away by Sect Leader Nie for stabbing his head commander. Jin GuangYao, formally Meng Yao, was known to be Jin GuangShan’s illegitimate son, but because he was unrecognized, nobody acknowledges this. Jin Ling called his uncle today the son of a prostitute, something that is known about him and something many people call Jin GuangYao behind his back and into his face as an insult.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded. “When Lan SiZhui received the shock just now, Jin GuangShan was talking about Jin GuangYao relaying the events of the battle between Lan SiZhui and Wen RuoHan. If Jin GuangShan learned that the last shard is with the two of you, he would demand it, so Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui do not want Jin GuangYao to tell Jin GuangShan about it. Jin GuangYao doesn’t appear to have told him about it yet, so Lan SiZhui and the others are afraid he wants to use this information for blackmail.”

Lan SiZhui blinked at the two of them owlishly. He knew the two of them were smart and he’d seen them working together, but he never knew they were so brilliant even in their youths. It was no wonder everyone who spoke of Lan WangJi’s generation, called them the greatest of their era.

“Which means, Jin ZiXuan is also Jin Ling’s uncle, that’s why he cares so much about him.” Wei WuXian concluded, rubbing his chin in thought. “But then, who is his father?”

“Unknown.” Lan WangJi said. Lan SiZhui felt like they were talking as if he wasn’t even there, but still, he should be denying.

“Ah, it’s...” He didn’t know how to deny it. “It’s not like that. Please, don’t make assumptions based on a few words.”

“Lan SiZhui, you have to admit, it makes sense. Oh.” Wei WuXian blinked, then chuckled. “But of course, you know it for sure. So, are we correct?”

“The truth can be twisted. Wrong conclusions can be drawn. Please, don’t theorize about this anymore.” He saluted to them in the most respectable voice he could muster. Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi shared a look, then Wei WuXian sighed.

“ChunYu-Jun, we don’t mean harm to you three. Why are you so secretive?” Lan SiZhui looked around, remembering Wen RuoHan’s words about how easy it was to spy on them before the war.

“Let us go inside, please.” He nodded towards the doors leading to his rooms. It was already dark and lanterns were not lit in this part of the palace, so Lan SiZhui quickly lit some, then pulled the door closed and activated a silencing talisman. While he did all this, Lan WangJi pulled out his guqin and settled at the low table, while Wei WuXian went over to the shelves and wiped his fingers over them, pulling it away to see how dirty they were.

“A silencing charm? You expect someone to listen in?” Wei WuXian blinked at him. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“My carelessness brought misfortune to me and mine in the past.” Lan SiZhui told him, then unstrapped Yingjiu and Feixu, sliding them into the sword holder, then tied out the qiankun pouch and summoned Hudie, leaning the guqin on its holder. Wei WuXian waited until he was done, then raised his eyebrows.

“Well, are we correct? Is Jin Ling’s uncle Jin GuangYao?” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Brother Wei, the truth is, there are secrets between us that cannot be shared. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and I went through a lot together. Many of it is sensitive information that if shared, it could ruin several lives. Please, don’t ask us to reveal these secrets, for we do not wish to harm anyone, but if we reveal them, we definitely will. Too many people know it already anyways.” He added quietly.

“Lan SiZhui, secrets like this, you should definitely not have them.” Wei WuXian furrowed his brows. “Besides, isn’t it in your Sect’s conduct not to lie, or to keep crucial information hidden or something like this?” He glanced over at Lan WangJi, who inclined his head. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“Brother Wei, the rules also say not to cause harm without reason. Unless it is crucial to share this information, I’d rather not say. I’m also troubled by having to decide what’s right and what’s wrong. You needn’t to remind me.”

There was silence for a few moments, then Wei WuXian nodded.

“Alright. If it bothers you so much, I won’t ask. But I will not stop being curious either. Don’t blame me if I put the picture together eventually. Okay?”

“Since I cannot stop you from wondering, all I ask is not to discuss it with other than Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun.”

“Brother knows?” Lan WangJi asked, looking over at Lan SiZhui. He nodded.

“Please, don’t ask him to reveal it either. I don’t wish to trouble him either.”

“Who knew that the renowned ChunYu-Jun had so many secrets?” Wei WuXian hummed. Lan WangJi, however nodded at Lan SiZhui’s request and turned to his guqin.

“Meditate.” He said, and Lan SiZhui was reminded of those times they spent in the indoctrination office. He smiled and took off his boots before he sat cross-legged onto the bed. Wei WuXian didn’t move away from the window he’d been standing by, instead, turned to open it, breaking the silencing spell. He heaved himself up onto the window’s ledge, then from his sleeve, he pulled out a black flute. Before he started playing, Lan SiZhui interrupted.

“Brother Wei.”

“Hm?” Wei WuXian looked over, eyebrows raised.

“Does your flute have a name?”

“I haven’t settled on one yet.” Wei WuXian spun the flute between his fingers.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Lan WangJi waited a beat, then began playing. He placed the first verse fully before Wei WuXian joined him, and the duet of the guqin and the flute filled the room, the tranquil notes of *Cleansing* calming Lan SiZhui’s tense body and mind.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Lan JingYi's title: 鳳刺客 Fèng CìKè: Fèng: “Phoenix” CìKè: “assassin/murderer”



## Casuistry II.

The next morning, there was knocking on Lan SiZhui's door. Expecting breakfast, he opened and smiled when he saw Lan JingYi and Jin Ling standing there. Lan JingYi returned the smile. "Good morning!" He greeted cheerily, then stepped aside to gesture three servants inside with their breakfast. Lan SiZhui let Lan JingYi and Jin Ling inside, then as soon as the servants put down the food, they hurried out. Closing the door behind them, he activated a silence talisman, then joined the others at the table. Jin Ling hid a huge yawn behind his sleeve.

"After Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi returned, Wei WuXian, Nie HuaiSang and uncle bullied me into drinking." He complained. "This is entirely unreasonable hour to be awake and so cheery." He said, then pulled the teapot closer to himself, lifting the top to sniff at it.

"It's true." Lan JingYi nodded. "Jin Ling drank with Wei WuXian so much, I was afraid he would get alcohol poisoning." Lan SiZhui was immediately concerned, but Jin Ling waved them off.

"I didn't drink that much."

"Not while Hanguang-Jun was there. When he left to go to sleep with the other Lan, you and the others really got into it. When did you even go to sleep? I left an hour after the Lan and it was already late."

"Honestly, I don't remember." Jin Ling yawned again.

"Are you alright though?" Lan SiZhui asked him and Jin Ling sent him an annoyed look.

"It's just alcohol. I can handle Wei WuXian and his stupid games." Lan SiZhui nodded and prepared to begin his breakfast. However, before that, Jin Ling spoke again. "Jin GuangYao denied everything, by the way."

"Yes." Lan JingYi confirmed. "Jin Ling was pretty rude to him though, so maybe because of that."

"What did he say exactly?" Lan SiZhui inquired.

"Mm..." Lan JingYi thought. "When we went back after you left, Jin GuangYao came up to us to ask if you were alright. We explained you were injured and still needed rest. He smiled and said he understands and hopes you feel better. Then MouShi said he ought to know you were injured, since he was also there when you battled Wen RuoHan. At this, Jin GuangYao said that he didn't want to assume, since you were a strong cultivator. Then, MouShi asked him what was he doing while we battled exactly. At this, Jin GuangYao said that he was actually in the back room, looking for something to help the battle with. He didn't find anything. MouShi asked then how did he know how our battle with Wen RuoHan went. At this, Jin GuangYao said he only saw a few moves you exchanged."

“Is...” Lan SiZhui hesitated. “Is it possible that he didn’t actually hear anything?”

“I doubt it.” Jin Ling grumbled, chewing on a steamed bun. “He said he was in the back room. Later that night I went there to take a look around. Well, the Jin soldiers didn’t actually let me go inside, but they let me close the door to the hallway leading to it. The same kind of door is at the back room as well. If only one of them was closed, he could definitely hear everything.”

“And if both were closed?”

“Lan SiZhui, you were in the middle of a battle. Do you think Uncle cared enough to close doors?”

“But there’s a chance that he didn’t hear it, right?” He looked between his two friends, who exchanged a look.

“If you want to believe that, sure.” Jin Ling shrugged at the end. “But I wouldn’t count on it.”

“I have to agree.” Lan JingYi nodded. “I don’t know why, but I just have this feeling that this isn’t over yet.” Jin Ling nodded in agreement as well. As if as a sign, suddenly there was a knock on the door. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with his friends, then went to open the door.

“ChunYu-Jun, excuse me for the intrusion.” A Lan disciple, Lan SiZhui’s junior, bowed. Lan SiZhui remembered that he was also at the reclaiming of Cloud Recesses, but he couldn’t recall if he ever learned the other’s name. However, the disciple kept talking, taking Lan SiZhui’s mind off this matter. “Sect Leader Lan wished for me to relay him and Sect Leader Nie wish to speak with you, Feng CiKe and MouShi in the main office of Nightless City. I’ll escort you there.” He said, all the while saluting.

“Ah, brother, how urgent is it?” Lan JingYi asked from the table. The disciple blinked at him.

“Sir, I’m afraid I don’t know. ZeWu-Jun didn’t say.”

“Then can you wait until we finish our meal? ChunYu-Jun is still healing, he needs to have regular meals. I hope you understand.”

“It’s not a problem.” The disciple bowed. “I’ll wait outside.”

“Thank you, brother.” Lan SiZhui returned the bow and the junior’s eyes widened and his face reddened. He bowed even lower, then stepped away, turning his back to the door. Lan SiZhui was a little confused by this as he closed the door, but he shook it off as he went back to the table.

“What do you think they want?” Lan JingYi asked, anxiously playing with his food.

“It’s best if we see for ourselves later.” Jin Ling said, picking up a bite. “Eat, so we can leave.” He nodded at the Lan’s still full plates. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi obliged.

The main office was located in the building behind the palace, a smaller pavilion, a little like the Lanshi in Cloud Recesses. As they were granted entrance, they saw the two Sect Leaders standing at the head table, looking troubled. Lan SiZhui was instantly uneasy. They closed the door behind them and Lan XiChen cast a silencing charm right away.

“Boys, thank you for coming.” He said with a nod at their bow.

“Sect Leader Lan, Sect Leader Nie.” They greeted. Nie MingJue watched them with narrowed eyes.

“How are you feeling?” Lan XiChen asked politely, though from the tense line of his shoulders, it didn’t seem like he wanted to talk about this right now.

“We’re fine.” Jin Ling spoke for the three of them. “What’s going on?”

“We haven’t had the chance to talk properly since the battle.” Lan XiChen said. “But we should.”

“What XiChen means,” Nie MingJue cut in before any of them could answer, “is that I’m the one who has questions for you.” Lan XiChen sighed, closing his eyes briefly.

“Out with it then.” Jin Ling said defiantly, though Lan SiZhui didn’t feel the same confidence as him, he also squared his shoulders.

“You three are from the future. No need to deny. Even if you were vague during the battle with Wen RuoHan, XiChen confirmed it.”

“Of course, he did.” Jin Ling muttered under his breath.

“Sect Leader Nie, we’ve never used our knowledge of the future to bring the Sects harm. If you’re worried about what Wen Chao said, that Lan SiZhui worked for them, it’s not true!” Lan JingYi jumped in quickly. Nie MingJue frowned.

“So, he is not a Wen?”

“Well...” Lan JingYi trailed off, awkward.

“Sect Leader Nie, when I was a toddler, the Lan Sect took me in. They raised me and up until a year ago, I also believed I was a Lan in blood as well as name.” Lan SiZhui said. “My adoptive father never revealed my heritage and due to a high fever, I forgot everything from before the Lan took me in. It was just last year that certain events led me to remember some things.”

“Just because your memories are new, doesn’t mean your loyalty is still to the Lan Sect.”

“It’s true.” Lan JingYi said. “In our own time Lan SiZhui is the head disciple of Cloud Recesses. The only thing he had ever done for his birth family was that he paid his respects to them, but right after he returned home and continued his studies as a Lan disciple.”

“Perhaps back in your time that was all he could do, but what would he do if he had the chance to save his family now?” Nie MingJue glared at Lan JingYi, but the boy stood his ground.

“When we discovered we’ve returned to the past, Lan SiZhui was the only one of us who did not want to change anything. ZeWu-Jun can also confirm this.” Lan JingYi said defiantly, and Lan XiChen nodded at this.

Nie MingJue was quiet for a long time, then he turned to Lan SiZhui. “Who was the person who took you into the Lan Sect? Does he know XiChen?” At this, there was quiet for a minute.

“Ah, Sect Leader Nie...” Lan SiZhui bowed apologetically. “Since Sect Leader Lan doesn’t wish to know more about the future, I shouldn’t say.”

“But I can confirm that he is also an upright and well-known cultivator.” Jin Ling said with a scoff. “Sect Leader Nie, we’ve worked together in the past few months. If that’s not enough proof for you to confirm Lan SiZhui’s personality, then nothing will change your mind. Just ask what you really want to know.”

Lan SiZhui also noticed this was probably not the main thing Nie MingJue wanted to ask, but since the Sect Leader had been hesitating, he also didn’t want to push. Now that Jin Ling called him out so bluntly, Nie MingJue steeled his heart and glared at the three of them.

“You knew the war was coming, and you also knew the perpetrators as well as the events going down in history. Many people died and many got injured, some directly, others indirectly because of you or this war. I ask you then, why didn’t you act sooner? Why didn’t you just assassinate Wen RuoHan when you had the chance to?!” At the end, he raised his voice. Lan SiZhui flinched.

“MingJue.” Lan XiChen said in a warning tone. “Remember they are not your enemies.” He paused. “If it was me who traveled back, would you also ask this?”

“It is not you, so I will not ask.” Nie MingJue said, not looking at Lan XiChen. “I want the answers from them.”

“Sect Leader Nie, the truth is, it is my fault.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. Since Nie MingJue didn’t trust him from the beginning, there was no point causing trouble for the others, not to mention it *was* Lan SiZhui’s fault they didn’t act sooner or more fiercely. “The Lan teachings say not to cause harm. When we arrived, I was torn because I also know many people from the future, mostly my age and younger than me. I have a junior in the future, he just received his sword and a few days before we came here he told me how excited he was to begin practicing. His parents met during the war when one of them got injured and the other tended to him. If the war never happened, my junior would never have been born. Sect Leader Nie, is that more just than letting people who would’ve died anyways die?”

Nie MingJue blinked at him and Lan XiChen bowed his head. They were all quiet at this, even Jin Ling keeping his opinion to himself.

“We weren’t completely idle though.” Lan JingYi spoke up after a while. “We’ve been trying to minimize the damage. Sect Leader Jiang and his wife are alive, Jin ZiXuan had joined the war and the Yin Iron had been destroyed.”

“Sect Leader Jiang?” Nie MingJue frowned at him and Lan JingYi’s eyes widened comically wide.

“Uh...”

“It doesn’t matter.” Jin Ling cut into Lan JingYi’s stuttering. “It didn’t happen anyways, so we might as well tell you. Yes, Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan had died in our time before the war. Now they are alive, thanks to me and SiZhui. So, Sect Leader Nie, is this the kind of help you expected from teenagers who came from the future?” Jin Ling’s steely, defiant gaze was fixed on Nie MingJue and the other looked back, though his eyes were also narrowed.

“I want to know everything that had happened in the future.” Nie MingJue said eventually. “What happened after the war? Have the Wen rose to power again? What of the Sects, who is in charge?”

“Sect Leader Nie, I don’t think this is wise.” Lan SiZhui said nervously. “If one knows the future, they will want to change it. We’re already here to do that, so please, don’t concern yourself with this.” Nie MingJue frowned at him.

“As your friend said, you’re three teenagers. What can you do to change things? You said you haven’t been idle so far, but XiChen says you’ve not changed much. The Jiang Sect heads might be alive, but other than that, how much have you actually changed?”

“As I said, we do not want to completely erase the future.” Lan SiZhui said, frustration rising in his chest. “There are things we still need to do, but once we do them, everything will already be different, for the better. Is that not enough?”

“Who are you to choose who you save and who you don’t?” Nie MingJue asked him. “This decision should not be yours alone.”

“Well, it is.” Jin Ling cut in, stepping forward, a little in front of Lan SiZhui as if to shield him from Nie MingJue. “There’s nothing you or Sect Leader Lan, or any Sect Leader on the whole world, can do about it. Or do you want to torture us to get the information out of us?” At this, Nie MingJue’s jaw clenched.

“Watch it.”

“Watch what? Even Wen RuoHan didn’t want information about the future, yet you do. He was supposed to be the villain and you are supposed to be righteous. Is this inquiry befitting the Nie Sect Leader?”

“You—” Nie MingJue glared, but Lan XiChen also jumped in.

“Jin Ling is right, MingJue.” He said placatingly. “So far we’ve lived our lives not knowing what our future is. You hear stories about people going to the fortune teller then living their

lives based on what they've said. A person is told they will die via sword, they will then put down their own sword and lives they would have saved will never be saved."

"Who says if they kept practicing the sword, they would have surely saved those people?" Nie MingJue glared at Lan XiChen. "The future is uncertain, as you said. Should we not know out of fear that our every move could change something drastically?"

"Yes." Lan XiChen sighed. "MingJue, we will most likely never agree on this topic. I would be cautious what we change and you want to change things. I think in this the boys should chose. They are the ones who know the future and they also know the stakes."

"So, we leave this choice to self-claimed clueless teenagers?"

"I never said we were clueless." Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed. "And two of us aren't teenagers anymore, or not for long. We know what we're doing. We've been fine on our own for a year now. Let us do our thing and don't get in our way."

"I don't like this." Nie MingJue stated firmly. "One of you is a Wen and one of you is a Jin. We have no idea what you say is true or a lie."

"Whatever would be the point of lying?" Jin Ling scoffed. "We are clearly not tyrants. Even if you don't trust us, trust we don't want to change the future to the worse. Is that too much to ask?"

"From people I don't know? Yes. It is."

"MingJue, that's enough." Lan XiChen said, a note of frustration in his tone. "I understand your concerns and your desire to change things. I do. But this is not our business. I enabled the boys to do whatever they thought was right and so far they've brought us to victory in the war and saved the Jiang Sect from many hardships, and who knows what else that they don't wish to tell us. Let this matter be theirs."

"As you said, who knows what else that they don't wish to tell us. Does that really not bother you?" Nie MingJue frowned at Lan XiChen.

"Bothers me? Yes. Do I wish to know? No. For once, it is information about a future that is no more and short of thanking heavens it didn't happen, there's not much value in that. Secondly, if I knew those things, they would cause me more worry than reassurance."

"This is—" Nie MingJue began, but Lan XiChen cut him off rudely.

"MingJue, enough. The boys are not here to cause harm but out of accident. Leave them be." Nie MingJue glared at Lan XiChen, who stood his gaze unwaveringly. "However, there are things we need to talk about." He said with a note of finality in his voice, then turned to the table and picked something up. It was one of the letters Jin Ling sent during the indoctrination. "Wen RuoHan kept records of the proof. We do not know who else knows about this."

"Hey, that's mine!" Jin Ling pointed at the letter.

“Wen Chao took them when he discovered I was receiving letters.” Lan SiZhui told him. “At the time...” He trailed off. “To be honest, I forgot about them.” He winced.

“How could you forget about them?! They weren’t mean to end up in Wen Chao’s hand. How could you be so careless?” Jin Ling glared at him and Lan SiZhui lowered his gaze.

“To be honest, Wen Chao just broke my leg the second time while he questioned about them. By the time we were taken back to our rooms, I couldn’t think past the pain.” At this, Jin Ling’s jaw clenched so tight, Lan SiZhui was afraid for the state of his teeth, and his closed his eyes, much like Lan XiChen did behind him.

“Now, I’m sorry I didn’t draw out Wen Chao’s death more. He would’ve deserved to have his legs also broken and forced to walk on them for weeks.” Jin Ling gritted his teeth. Wen Chao’s black veined face popped into Lan SiZhui’s mind and he shook his head.

“Please, don’t say that. Nobody deserves to be tortured.”

“You’re too soft, Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling glared at him. “Wen Chao could torture you for months and you’d forgive him.”

“I didn’t forgive him, please, don’t be mistaken.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “In fact, I’m still very angry at him.”

“You seem more sad than angry to me.” Jin Ling accused. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I’m also sad.”

“Alright. Lan SiZhui cannot be blamed for not minding the letters.” Lan JingYi inserted. Jin Ling reluctantly nodded.

“Sure. Still, these should be burned and buried.” He stepped over and picked up a scroll, opening it and reading some of its contents before dropping it back onto the pile, still open. “This information shouldn’t ever see daylight.”

Lan XiChen nodded. “The best we can do now is to burn and bury them, but that doesn’t change the fact that others than Wen Chao or Wen RuoHan could’ve seen them. We’ve stolen them from Wen RuoHan’s office, but we don’t know who else had seen them.”

“Like my uncle.” Jin Ling nodded, turning to Lan XiChen. “ZeWu-Jun, you’re close to him. Can you figure out if he knows about us?”

“He might not know.” Lan SiZhui argued. “Wouldn’t it just raise his suspicions if we asked more about it?”

“Besides, Jin GuangYao and I don’t share an intimate relationship like you’re suggesting.” Lan XiChen said, looking at Jin Ling somewhat puzzled. “Did we, in the past?”

Jin Ling paused, then scoffed. “Aren’t you the one who said you don’t want to know much about it? Then don’t ask questions.”

“Jin GuangYao is your paternal uncle?” Nie MingJue looked at Jin Ling curiously, previous distaste gone from his voice. “That means... Your father is...”

“Jin ZiXuan, yes.” Jin Ling huffed.

“I see.” Nie MingJue nodded, clearly connecting the dots as he looked over at Lan XiChen. The other was watching him closely. “The issue still stands though. Jin GuangYao is smart.” He said with some sadness. “He was a really promising youth when I knew him. Unfortunately, we had a fallout, so now he is associating himself with the Jin Sect.”

“Lan SiZhui, last night...” Lan XiChen began and Lan SiZhui nodded, signaling he understood what Lan XiChen meant.

“ZeWu-Jun, while we were fighting Wen RuoHan, he revealed he knew we were from the future. Jin GuangYao said he was in the back room at the time, so we don’t know for sure if he knows about this as well. Last night Sect Leader Jin said Jin GuangYao had witnessed our battle. If he knows about us coming from the future, he could use it against us at his convenience.”

“I know it is dangerous if anyone knew about your origins, but I’ve gotten to know Jin GuangYao as a righteous person. MingJue also vouches for his character. Why are you so worried about him?”

“And why did you accuse him of giving that map to Wen Chao also?” Nie MingJue asked Jin Ling. The three boys shared a look.

“You just have to trust that we have a good reason not to trust certain people.” Jin Ling said.

“Jin GuangYao used to be my subordinate.” Nie MingJue said. “I want to know what you’re accusing him of.” He glared at Jin Ling, returning to his previous scoff. Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“We’ve been over this. Accept that we know what we’re doing and let it go.” They glared at each other for a while, then Lan XiChen sighed, stepping in.

“In that case, we trust your judgement. Unless it is absolutely necessary for us to know, we do not wish to.” He paused, giving Nie MingJue a pointed look. “However, I’ve thought hard if we should keep doing what you’ve been since you’ve arrived to the past. Now that you’re known figures of the cultivation world, you shouldn’t involve yourself in secret missions anymore. You’re still much too young to conspire like this. Are you sure you don’t want to just reveal everything and be done with this matter? Your lives are in danger as is your reputation if you keep working in the shadows like this. I can’t help but worry for my future disciples and Young Master Jin.”

“Why are you worried?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue, crossing his arms over his chest. “Even in my time Lan SiZhui was the head disciple of Cloud Recesses. Lan JingYi is an idiot, but he is actually pretty good at this too. As for myself, I’ve been on my own my whole life. I can take care of myself.”



“Young Mistress, I have to disagree.” Lan JingYi chimed in, and right away, Lan SiZhui knew Lan JingYi was about to insult the other. He looked heavenward for patience. Lan JingYi counted on his fingers. “You were on your own on Dafan Mountain and almost got killed. You were on your own in the Nie ancestral hall and almost got killed.” At this, Nie MingJue’s expression turned alarmed. “You were on your own in Yi City and almost got killed. You were—”

“Alright!” Jin Ling snapped. “So, I’m not a good cultivator. What’s your point? I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“All those times Senior Wei and Hanguang-Jun had to save you.” Lan JingYi told him.

“That’s their jobs as my seniors!” Jin Ling turned up his nose. “And if they wouldn’t have come, uncle would’ve saved me anyways.”

“Your uncle was too occupied trying to hunt down Wei WuXian.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“Boys.” Lan XiChen interrupted and the two looked over. Lan XiChen raised his eyebrows pointedly. Lan JingYi turned back to Jin Ling.

“Anyways, the point is, you were not alone back then and you’re not alone now either. We’re here, aren’t we?”

“What good you are, insulting me all day long. How dare you!” Jin Ling huffed.

“Young Mistress, aren’t you the one prancing all over the place? It’s not my fault it’s so easy to make fun of you.”

“Boys.” Lan XiChen repeated, this time with more vehemence in his voice. “If you’re done, let us get back to the topic at hand.”

“ZeWu-Jun, the truth is, there are still some things that need to be taken care of. The war was one of our concerns, but for the sake of our future, we still have some things to do.” Lan JingYi said. Lan SiZhui turned to him.

“JingYi, since the war is over and the YiLing Patriarch is not as targeted this time, should we really concern ourselves with these matters?”

“Of course.” Jin Ling glared. “We’re barely a week past the final battle of the Sunshot Campaign. Didn’t you learn this? The YiLing Patriarch gets accused during the time after the war. What about your cousins?”

“They’re safely back on Dafan Mountain.” Lan SiZhui said. “And surely, now that I also practiced demonic cultivation in public, shouldn’t it be logical that the YiLing Patriarch is not as targeted this time?”

“How do you know they’re back on Dafan Mountain?” Jin Ling asked. “Wei WuXian also thought they were safe when in reality they were held prisoners. Besides, people from Dafan Mountain were also imprisoned, weren’t they? That’s how you ended up where you had. So, saying they’re safe on Dafan Mountain, isn’t it arrogant to think that?”

Lan SiZhui paused, thinking about that, but he had to realize Jin Ling was right. He never connected that the people who were taken to the Burial Mounds could've been from Dafan Mountain. But of course, Lan SiZhui had to come from somewhere and if Wen Qing and Wen Ning also went home during Wei WuXian's time, maybe that's how they ended up in Qiongqi Path.

"We have to go there!" He looked up, eyes wide.

"No." Jin Ling shut him down sternly. Lan SiZhui blinked at him. "What's with you always wanting to run to the Wen's rescue while you're injured?" Jin Ling threw up his hands. "Didn't you learn from last time? We were almost beaten in the YiLing supervisory office and you were perfectly healthy by then. You're supposed to be the most sensible one of us. What can you and Lan JingYi do in your states?"

"If you're concerned about how the remaining Wen will be treated, why don't you just speak up during the discussion this afternoon?" Nie MingJue asked. "Sect Leader Jin delayed the decision because XiChen asked him to delay making a final decision until then."

"Right." Lan JingYi nodded. "Thanks for that, ZeWu-Jun." Lan XiChen inclined his head and Nie MingJue raised surprised eyebrows.

"It was you who asked him to convince Jin GuangShan and Jiang FengMian to wait?"

"As you said yourself, we're concerned about how the remaining Wen will be treated." Lan JingYi said. "There are powerful people who would not look on favorably if they were treated unjustly."

"Like Lan SiZhui?" Nie MingJue watched Lan SiZhui from the corner of his eyes and Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"Like him, and others, whose moral compass isn't as strict as his." He said.

"The YiLing Patriarch?" Lan XiChen asked in quiet understanding. Jin Ling nodded.

"Who is this YiLing Patriarch you talk about? You mentioned him before." Nie MingJue inquired.

"It's best if we don't say." Lan JingYi said. "It would be dangerous to him and you. Just know that there are other people who wouldn't hold themselves back if certain people were harmed and we don't wish to repeat that."

"But I ask you, how do you think the Wen should be treated then?" Nie MingJue frowned. "They cannot all be excused."

"We don't want them excused." Lan SiZhui argued. "We want just treatment."

"They weren't getting the punishment fit to their crimes in your time?" Nie MingJue frowned.

"Not the right ones."

“ChunYu-Jun. You’re a kind and considerate person, what do you mean? The Wen wanted to eliminate the Sects, kill our families and people. Who shouldn’t be punished?”

“Lan SiZhui is right. There are many people in the Wen Sect who didn’t agree with Wen RuoHan but were forced to bow their heads to them. MingJue, we cannot view the guilty the same as the innocent.” Lan XiChen told him.

“And who should decide who’s guilty and who is innocent?” Nie MingJue frowned. “No offense towards ChunYu-Jun, but I’ve also been there when Wen RuoHan said he is your uncle. Are you the right person to determine your own family’s fate?”

“Sect Leader Nie, I don’t wish to make this judgement.” Lan SiZhui paused, considering what he was going to say next, then decided. “The truth is, in our time I was one of the people who were imprisoned along with the town elders.” He waited a moment, hoping he wouldn’t need to spell this out.

“But XiChen tells me you weren’t even born yet.” Nie MingJue frowned.

“Exactly.” Lan JingYi said.

“In your time, infants were also imprisoned?” Nie MingJue huffed. “That’s a ridiculous claim, Lan SiZhui. If you were really imprisoned, then how come you are part of the Lan Sect? How come you grew up there? How did you survive such conditions?”

“The YiLing Patriarch saved me and my family from the prison. He took us away. Then he was killed along with my family. The only reason I stayed alive was because he hid me and... And a Lan disciple found me. He took me to the Cloud Recesses and the only people who knew about my heritage were him and his close family. I had a high fever at the time and forgot most of what happened before he rescued me, so I was raised as a Lan, unaware that in reality I was a Wen. After the YiLing Patriarch returned, so did some of my memories, so now I remember living with him and the Wen previously.”

There was silence following his words as Nie MingJue seemed to digest this. Lan XiChen was also deep in thought. After a few moments though, he nodded.

“We will propose a fair trial to all Wen prisoners. Those who are found guilty will receive punishment fit to their crimes, those who are innocent will be excused.”

“So be it.” Nie MingJue nodded. “As for your other plans, what are they?”

The three boys exchanged a look.

“We haven’t discussed it yet.” Lan JingYi said. “But I think as for right away, we will return to Cloud Recesses to heal. After that...” He shrugged.

“I promised that after the war, I will go to Dafan Mountain.” Lan SiZhui said.

“What for?” Jin Ling frowned.

“I need to return Feixu.”

“Do you even know whose sword is it?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “It belonged to one of Wen Chao’s men, Wen ChanYu. His brother and sister-in-law still live on Dafan... I think they’re farmers and healers.” He furrowed his brows, trying to remember what Hua Qing said about them.

“What a coincidence, that you pick up a sword randomly and it turns out it belongs to your family branch.” Jin Ling eyed him. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“According to Wei WuXian, it’s because of my blood relation to them that I can use Feixu.”

“That makes sense.” Lan JingYi nodded.

“Why didn’t you just give it to Wen Qing when she left to go back?” Jin Ling frowned.

“She refused to accept it. Said I should return it myself.” Lan SiZhui said.

“How arrogant.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “I’m not going there, so if you want to go there, go by yourselves. I’ve associated enough with the Wen. I don’t need to talk to them unnecessarily.”

“Where will you go then? Back to Koi Tower with your uncle?” Lan JingYi cocked an eyebrow, crossing his arms across his chest. Jin Ling glared at him.

“I’ll go to Lotus Pier. Didn’t I tell you already?”

“You’ll leave your father just like that?”

“He’s fine. He’s safe in Koi Tower. How do I know if...” He cut himself off, looking towards the Sect Leaders. “I’m more needed at Lotus Pier.”

“Madam Yu is going to throw you out so hard, you won’t stop until you land in Koi Tower.” Lan JingYi teased.

“Maybe she will. Maybe she won’t. It’s none of your business, is it?”

“We should keep in touch regardless.” Lan SiZhui said. “Even if we manage to convince Sect Leader Jin about the Wen, we should monitor Qiongqi Path.”

“Don’t be so clingy. We’ll see each other in a few months anyways.”

“What do you mean?” Lan JingYi frowned at him.

“The Phoenix Mountain Crowd Hunt is this fall, so you will come to Lanling anyways.” Jin Ling told them.

“I forgot about the Crowd Hunt.” Lan JingYi said, distracted. “That’s when We—The YiLing Patriarch...”

“Yes.” Jin Ling nodded, cutting Lan JingYi’s stuttering short. “So, you must come.”

“They will be there, Jin Ling.” Lan XiChen reassured from the side. “But Jin Ling, I didn’t know the Jin Sect will host a Crowd Hunt this fall.”

“They will, if it goes as it did in our time.” Jin Ling said. “I don’t know when they will announce it and the timing may be different. But they have definitely been talking about it, I’ve heard.”

“And an important event will take place then?” Nie MingJue asked curiously. “That involves this YiLing Patriarch?”

“We will see.” Jin Ling shrugged. “Don’t concern yourself with it. It’s our business, not yours.” For a moment, Nie MingJue didn’t look pleased, more insulted than anything, but after a moment, seemed to give up.

“It is almost time for lunch. You three go and have a meal. We will meet during the conference.” He said. Lan XiChen removed the silencing charm.

“We will gather at the courtyard in three hours.” Lan XiChen told Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui, who nodded at that. The three of them bowed, then left the room.

“What do you think of this?” Lan JingYi asked. “Maybe Sect Leader Nie knowing it isn’t as bad as we thought it would be.”

“I didn’t think it would be bad.” Lan SiZhui said. “I just didn’t want more people to know. It’s always harder to keep a secret if many people know.”

“Maybe not.” Lan JingYi hummed. “How many situations had ZeWu-Jun pulled us out of that we couldn’t have explained in a different way?”

“He’s still not a saint.” Jin Ling mentioned.

“MouShi, I didn’t ask for your opinion.” Lan JingYi told him plainly.

“I didn’t ask to be stuck here either, yet here we are.” Jin Ling said back. Lan JingYi glared at him and Lan SiZhui sighed.

“You two, how about trying to argue less?” He asked wearily.

“He’s annoying.” Jin Ling said. “It’s hard not to comment on that.”

“And you’re rude.” Lan JingYi told him. “I’m a Lan, I was raised to correct rudeness.”

“You’re the rudest Lan I know.” Jin Ling huffed.

“Because I have to deal with people like you and it rubs off on me. Otherwise I’m a very kind person.”

“Me too.” Jin Ling stated proudly.

“You’re so not.” Lan JingYi glared.

“This is not what I meant.” Lan SiZhui mentioned, but was ignored as the two kept arguing all the way to Lan SiZhui’s rooms then inside as well.



Inside the reception hall everyone settled much like they did last night. There were slightly less people gathered, some disciples missing, but the main members of each Sect and Clan were present, even Wei WuXian, who claimed to hate these conferences. This time, the Lan Sect was one of the last ones to arrive, just before the Nie Sect. They all sat in their previous seats and were served tea and snacks. Jin GuangShan and the Jin Sect were nowhere to be seen, the hall’s doors wide open, so people could come and go freely.

This time, the room was painted in light as sometime between the previous night and now the heavy drapes were removed from in front of the windows. In this light, the room seemed much less threatening and much less like the battlefield Lan SiZhui had tortured a man and Lan JingYi killed Wen RuoHan in.

As they waited for the Jin Sect to arrive, Lan SiZhui wondered where had the tapestries gone that Wen Chao showed him. He also wondered if he was allowed to take some books from the Wen’s library to study later. Even though Wen Chao was just baiting him when he showed him those tapestries, Lan SiZhui was genuinely curious about the Wen Sect’s history ever since Wen ZhuLiu told him about the Zhao Clan’s fall.

“ZeWu-Jun.” He turned to the side where Lan XiChen was sitting with his brother, pouring themselves tea after a brief conversation. Lan XiChen turned to him curiously and slightly alarmed. “I was wondering; what will happen to the Wen Sect’s possessions now?” Lan XiChen seemed relieved about the topic, and thought with his lips pursed.

“I imagine some of it will be taken as booty. Most of the wealth will go to war expenses and distributed among the smaller Clans in the area as reward for their cooperation. This will probably be included in the discussion conference though, so listen closely.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui.

“I meant the books and such.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. At this, Lan WangJi also turned towards them, curious.

“Well...” Lan XiChen seemed unsure, the smile fading from his lips. “I can’t imagine Jin GuangShan wanting to donate them back to the Wen Sect. They will be either taken by the other Sects for safekeeping or burned.”

“Burned?” Lan SiZhui was alarmed.

“In smaller disputes when one Clan or Sect destroys the other, the losing Sect or Clan’s possessions are also put up for auction.” Lan WangJi said.

“Right.” Lan XiChen nodded. He then tilted his head, curiously. “Is there something you’d like, SiZhui?”

“Just... Despite the evil doing, the Wen Sect was still a big part of history. It shouldn’t be erased just because the Wen Sect is gone now.” Lan SiZhui answered, somewhat embarrassed.

“That’s a generous thought.” Lan XiChen nodded. “I’ll bring it up during the conference.” Lan SiZhui nodded, grateful. “Perhaps I could volunteer you and WangJi to look through them, see what you’d like to keep?” He added with a small smile, looking between him and his brother. Lan WangJi turned to look forward instead of at them.

“If brother wishes, WangJi will go through the Wen Sect’s library.” He said with an impassive face.

“Mn. WangJi, I never mentioned you’d need to look through the library. I only said the Wen’s possessions. They have all kind of things, not just books, you know.” Lan XiChen teased. Lan WangJi looked annoyed at that, but Lan SiZhui couldn’t hold back his giggle. The adoptive father he knew was very serious and renowned, detached from the world, so it was rare that he’d show such childish emotion. Lan SiZhui found it delightful that the teenage self of his adoptive father still had such quirks.

They didn’t have the chance to talk more, because Jin GuangShan left the back room where he’d apparently been. Lan SiZhui looked around and saw that in the meantime the Jin Sect also arrived. Jin GuangShan walked up to his own seat and faced them. Everyone hushed and everyone sat.

“Friends, I hope you all enjoyed the banquet last night.” Jin GuangShan smiled at the room. Several servants ran around, handing out teas and snacks. The doors were still open, letting a nice breeze in. “The past week had been spent recovering and getting organized after the war once again. There are many things to do still, which is why we came together today. There are serious matters to discuss, some cannot wait. I know you all wish to return home and I promise after this, you can. But Sect Leaders Lan, Nie and Jiang and I found it best if we’ve made a decision about how to handle the future situation together, so I figured since we’re all here, this is the best opportunity.

“Firstly, there’s an immediate matter that needs to be addressed. We’ve been trying to investigate, but it turned out fruitless unfortunately, so I’d like all Sect and Clan Leaders to keep your eyes on any Wen that might’ve escaped the battle here a week before. I’m afraid many important documents and items of the Wen Sect went missing between the battle and now. These documents involve a directory as well. In this directory, there are names recorded of our own who had aided the Wen Sect during this war. It is crucial to find this document, so we can arrest those who worked against their own Sects.”

“Wouldn’t Jin GuangYao also be on the list?” Lan JingYi whispered as he leaned over. “It is not beyond reason to think maybe he was the one who stole it.”

“Jin GuangYao was working for the Wen, but only as a spy.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, equally as quiet. “He got recognized by his father because of this, remember?”

“Right.” Lan JingYi frowned. “Then maybe there really is a thief.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Boys.” Lan XiChen chided gently and the two of them quieted.

“Sect Leader Jin, why do we need this document?” Clan Leader Yao called out. “The war is over and the Wen are defeated. Now we shall look for enemy amongst our own? I say we forget it. These people can’t conspire with the Wen anymore, since there is no Wen Sect anymore.”

Several people seemed to agree with him.

“Clan Leader Yao, it is true that the war is over and the Wen are defeated. However, we also need to think about those who resent us for this. Who’s to say if we leave those people alone, they won’t conspire against us to bring back the Wen Sect?” Jin GuangShan leveled the other with a look. “Even if we destroyed the Wen Sect, there are still people who are loyal to them across the land. They might take advantage when we’re off guard and reunite to bring back the Wen Sect. Remember, Clan Leader Yao that we were hit by many losses. While we won in the battle of Nightless City, it left all Sects in a weakened state.”

“I agree!” Said one of the Jin Sect’s disciples, the one who had often been by Jin ZiXuan’s side, but Lan SiZhui didn’t know his name. “Uncle, how about the known spies among us?”

“Known spies?” Jin GuangShan raised his eyebrows. Many people leaned together to whisper.

“We’ve all heard what Wen Chao said on the Scorching Sun Palace’s steps, didn’t we?” He called out arrogantly. Lan SiZhui looked away and bowed his head.

“Jin ZiXun, what did he say?” Jin GuangYao asked politely, a smile hiding in his tone.

“He said ChunYu-Jun might wear white and a Lan forehead ribbon, but there’s Wen blood in his veins.” Jin ZiXun said loudly. “Just because he killed Core-Melting Hand, did we all forget that everything Wen Chao said about him working for the Wen in secret made sense?”

“Young Master Jin, Lan SiZhui had proved he is not working for the Wen several times over the war, but also in Nightless City, when he was the one to battle with both Wen RuoHan and Wen Chao, even if he wasn’t the one to kill them.” Wei WuXian said, leveling his gaze on Jin ZiXun. “Why do you bring this up now?”

“And you don’t find it suspicious at all, that even though he fought both Wen RuoHan and Wen Chao, he wasn’t the one to kill them?” Jin ZiXun countered. “If he’s so strong he could fight them, what stopped him from killing them?” At that, whispers rose again.

“Young Master Jin, Sect Leader Jin.” Lan XiChen spoke up, and all attention turned to him. “When this Campaign began, I took full responsibility for all Lan SiZhui’s actions. If there’s something these respected cultivators find amiss in his behavior, please address it to me.”

“ZeWu-Jun—” Lan SiZhui tried to say, but Lan XiChen raised his hand, silencing him. Lan SiZhui bowed his head and quieted.



“Then, would Sect Leader Lan be so kind and explain ChunYu-Jun’s suspicious behavior to us?” Jin GuangShan asked, bowing to Lan XiChen. Lan XiChen inclined his head.

“If I remember correctly, Wen Chao said his biggest proof was Lan SiZhui’s use of resentful energy. As we’ve explained it earlier, this is a unique usage of our Sect’s musical cultivation. I’ve approved of Lan SiZhui learning the original Qin language the Lan Sect had invented. When he got into a situation where he couldn’t escape with different methods, Lan SiZhui used the knowledge to control resentful ghosts. As many of you know, the Qin language the Lan use can settle restless spirits. Many of you also saw on the battlefield throughout the past months, how this works. Would you say subduing the puppets Wen RuoHan created is also sinister?” He paused, leaving time for the others to digest this.

“Wen Chao was incorrect when he said Lan SiZhui uses resentful energy as his father had, for Lan SiZhui doesn’t have nor a shard of Yin Iron, nor a resentful spiritual tool to channel the resentful energy. As far as I’m aware, using musical cultivation to manipulate resentful energy had been an orthodox cultivational method for centuries.” He said at last and many Clan and Sect Leaders voiced their agreement.

“Sect Leader Lan, while your words are wise and prove that Lan SiZhui’s methods are not at odds with the Lan Sect’s, who can say this won’t inspire others to also use this method to walk the wicked path?” Clan Leader Yao asked. Lan SiZhui looked over at Wei WuXian, who rolled his eyes at his look, then said loudly:

“The Lan Sect is full of righteous and upright cultivators. If what Sect Leader Lan says is true, then Lan SiZhui’s method is also as difficult as the Lan Sect’s musical cultivation. Clan Leader Yao, I have tried to learn the Lan Sect’s scores, since I am also talented with the dizi, but the Qin language is complex and hard to learn. I have only managed to learn half a song and it sounds like skinning a cat when I play it, and my teacher is the renowned Hanguang-Jun. I ask you then, Clan Leader Yao, do you think it is realistic to say anyone could just pick this method up?”

“Wei WuXian, we’ve all seen you play the scores Lan SiZhui played during the Sunshot Campaign as well.” Jin ZiXun said. “How can you claim you’re bad at learning the scores when you played them in this very place?”

“Anyone can copy the sound of something.” Wei WuXian said with a frown. “I can also sing like a bird, but that won’t make me understand the birds better. Qin language is known for its delicacy, if you get one note wrong, you could kill someone instead of saving them. I can play the same song Lan SiZhui played, but that won’t make me a master in his cultivation method.”

At this, Jiang Cheng muttered something and Wei WuXian smirked momentarily.

“I say they’ve offered enough explanation.” Nie MingJue said. “As you had been, I was also suspicious of Lan SiZhui when I heard Wen Chao’s words on the steps, but then Lan SiZhui saved not just my life but my men’s life as well as everyone else’s here. For this, I am grateful to him instead of suspicious, as you should be as well.” While his words were in Lan SiZhui’s favor, his tone was less than pleasant. He also said it with a displeased expression.

However, his words were more important than his tone and everyone seemed to realize this as Jin ZiXun also quieted.

“I agree. Let’s move on.” Jiang FengMian said. Jin GuangShan inclined his head.

“Naturally, we respect ChunYu-Jun and his talents and efforts greatly. ZeWu-Jun, ChunYu-Jun, please, do not take offense.” He told them with a little awkward laugh and Lan XiChen inclined his head, though there was no emotion on his features. “As for the situation at hand, as I said, the thief or thieves need to be caught. This directory might already be gone, but if they read it, they might know what was in it.

“As for other businesses, I have gone through Wen RuoHan’s papers and reports and I have a list of fugitives. The Nie Sect had offered to hunt them down, so Chifeng-Zun, I entrust this list to you.” He gestured and Jin GuangYao hurried over, bowing as he held out a scroll to Nie MingJue. The other eyed Jin GuangYao for a moment, then took the scroll, nodding his head towards Jin GuangShan. “As for the other criminals of the Wen Sect, even though we’ve waited until now to make a final decision, I feel like we all agree that they need to all be questioned after the missing shard of the Yin Iron as well as about their crimes.”

“Sect Leader Jin, about this.” Lan XiChen stood up, and Jin GuangShan blinked at him, surprised. “I would like to know what fate awaits those who are found guilty.”

“Ah, well, of course, they will be punished for their crimes.” Jin GuangShan said.

“Yes, but how, if I may ask?” Lan XiChen tilted his head to the side. “Sect Leader Jin, while I also have no love lost towards the Wen Sect, it is undeniable they have a long history of being an upright Sect. While their evildoings are unforgivable, do all their people deserve to die for one’s mistake?”

“Naturally, the Lan Sect is generous and kind.” Jin GuangShan smiled as a proud grandfather. He then sighed. “Unfortunately, ZeWu-Jun, I’m afraid we cannot afford to question all of them individually and find a punishment that will fit their crimes perfectly. I say we confine and monitor the old, weak, and young, as long as they stop making trouble. And those who have killed our cultivators must be executed.”

“Sect Leader Jin, if the old, weak and young are not making trouble, why disturb them in the first place?” Lan XiChen furrowed his brows. “The Jin Sect had offered refuge to many who wished to escape the war. However, not everyone in the Wen Sect’s territory had been hit severely by this war as others. Should a family be imprisoned just because they didn’t leave their farm and tended to the crops instead of going away to Lanling?”

“Sect Leader Lan, as I said earlier, who knows who is trying to conspire against us while we let our guards down?” Jin GuangShan asked back, annoyed. “The Wen Sect is full of evil people who like to scheme. How can we know those people you’re talking about won’t revive the Sect while we’re busy rebuilding our homes?”

“Sect Leader Jin, I don’t think this fear is realistic.” Jiang FengMian said. “The Wen Sect had seen the power of the four Sects when they unite. We brought down the head of the Wen Sect

as if we went to war every other week. This will make anyone who wishes to face us pause and think if they are certain in their actions.”

“I agree. They cannot revive the entire Wen Sect under our noses.” Nie MingJue said. “I say let them reunite and conspire and then kill those too. At least this way, we will make sure the evil is destroyed and that the remaining rebels will think twice and become complacent instead.”

“Wouldn’t that be just *us* growing complacent with the situation instead?” Su She asked from behind Lan SiZhui, and he was startled for a moment. Su She, following the death of his brother, Su MuShi, who died during the battle in Qishan, became the leader of the Su Clan. Lan JingYi said he’d already heard whispers about Su She wanting to part ways with the Lan Sect. Unfortunately, in their time Su She only became part of Jin GuangYao’s plan later. Even though Jin Ling suspected he is the one who drew the map for Wen Chao, they had no way to prove it, so until they could, they had to endure the next events, which was Su She parting ways from the Lan Sect, severing their ties rather rudely. They would need to look out for him, but for now, they had to wait.

“Yes.” Clan Leader Yao agreed. “Who’s to say the Wen won’t conspire and murder us in our sleep?”

“Clan Leader Yao, you’re far from being a threat to the Wen Sect, so in your place, I wouldn’t worry.” Jin Ling said loudly. “Also, the Wen Sect was a cultivation Sect, not an assassination group. Don’t think too highly of them.”

“Even Jin Ling is annoyed by him.” Lan JingYi whispered to Lan SiZhui, who repressed a smile.

“Everything annoys Jin Ling, this isn’t a feat. Pay attention.” He whispered back.

“Excuse my Young Disciple for his rudeness, he grew up without a mother.” Jin GuangShan said with a stiff smile. Jin Ling huffed and leaned back, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Isn’t he correct though?” Lan XiChen asked. “The Wen are not assassins. There’s no reason to fear them so.”

“Sect Leader Lan, Sect Leader Jiang, Sect Leader Nie. All smaller Clans and I are also in favor of monitoring the Wen Sect’s people while you’re against it. How should we resolve this situation?” Jin GuangShan asked. There was quiet in the room for a long minute.

“I agree there’s no need to keep an eye on the weak.” Jiang FengMian said. “How about we collect the cultivators only, then?”

“What if they didn’t commit any crimes?” Lan XiChen countered.

“We will question them.” Jin GuangShan sighed and nodded. “I entrust this job to my sons. They will judge them justly. Those who have committed crimes and killed in the name of the Wen Sect will be executed. So, will be the generals and remaining leaders. The others we will confine and monitor.”

“But where should we confine them?” Nie MingJue asked.

“Father, if I may.” Jin GuangYao stepped forward with a bow. Jin GuangShan nodded. “The Wen Clan has a place called Qiongqi Path. It's a secluded ancient road in a valley, which is easy to defend and difficult to attack. Why not keep them there?” Lan SiZhui winced at that, accidentally knocking over his teacup. Everyone looked his way for the moment, then a servant hurried over to clean up the mess and everyone's attention was back on the discussion.

“Sect Leader Jin, if you decide to take them there, then the Lan Sect would like to assist.” Lan XiChen said, and there was an implication in his voice, or perhaps it just seemed so to Lan SiZhui, that he wanted to check who is being taken there.

“Sect Leader Lan, your Sect was also attacked by the Wen.” Jin GuangShan said. “Don't you think it would be wiser to look after your Sect? The Jin Sect can handle the Wen Sect. There's no need to concern yourself with this, you can rest assured.”

“Sect Leader Jin, it would be unbefitting of the Lan Sect to just leave all the responsibility to the Jin Sect. Naturally, we will help you as much as we can, to clean up this mess.” He told Jin GuangShan, who watched him with narrowed eyes.

“I say, we all send a disciple to show our support to the Jin Sect.” Nie MingJue said, then him and Lan XiChen exchanged a look and nodded to each other. “It is only fair, since Sect Leader Jin goes through all this trouble in our stead. Even the Jiang Sect can spare a disciple for this, right, Sect Leader Jiang?”

“Of course.” Jiang FengMian nodded, not taking offense. “We do not expect Sect Leader Jin to take this job on all by himself.”

“That's fine then.” Jin GuangShan smiled tightly. “Thank you for your support.” He bowed his head to them. After this, Lan XiChen sat and sighed. His brother poured him fresh tea.

“Thank you, WangJi.” He smiled and Lan WangJi nodded.

“With this matter out of the way, I say we break for a few minutes and collect our thoughts.” Jin GuangShan said. Everyone thanked him for the chance and Lan SiZhui stood and Lan JingYi stumbled to follow.

“ZeWu-Jun.” He turned to Lan XiChen, who looked up curiously. Lan SiZhui saluted him deeply. “Thank you for all your efforts.”

“Ah, SiZhui, that's not necessary.” Lan XiChen was quick to stand and gently bring him out of his bow. “If you haven't told us what you have gone through, I'm afraid I'd have gone complacent and accepted Jin GuangShan's first proposal. Your words reminded me what the right thing to do was and for that, I should be the one to thank you. The Lan Sect is truly lucky to have found you.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“I just hope this won't cause more trouble for you in the future.” Lan SiZhui worried.

“Impossible.” Lan WangJi said from where he sat, sipping his tea. He looked up. “Brother made a righteous choice.”

“Sometimes being righteous isn’t enough.” Lan SiZhui said sadly. “But I hope Hanguang-Jun is right.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded with the air of someone who knew he was right. Lan SiZhui smiled at that, then bowed to them again.

The discussion restarted a few minutes later. Everyone sat and Jin GuangShan also seemed to be in a better mood.

“Friends, let’s continue. The next thing we need to discuss are not going to be as troubling as the previous topics. We have decided to distribute a part of the Wen Sect’s treasures amongst the gentry Sects as booty. We hope this contribution will compensate for the harms done to your homes. Another part of the treasures will go to the cooperating Clans and smaller Sects as a reward for helping out. The final part will be used to deal with the fallout of the war. Naturally, the prisoners also need to work and dress.”

Nobody objected at this, and Jin GuangShan seemed satisfied at this. “Everyone’s portions had been transferred to their quarters. As for the other possessions of the Wen Sect, that is a grimmer topic. Wen RuoHan had a personal library with several books that should not see daylight. We’ve decided to burn them all, so there won’t even be a page left of it. As for the Wen Sect’s library, I suspect the Sects and Clans would all like to take some of the texts to study. They will be available to browse through later. As for the personal possessions of the Wen family and the inner disciples, we’ve decided to auction them in Qishan. Many have already turned up here, asking after one thing or another, so it will be easy to get rid of them.”

“Sect Leader Jin.” Lan XiChen spoke up again, though this time he remained seated. Jin GuangShan pressed his lips together, the annoyance showing on his face for a moment before he turned to Lan XiChen with a polite smile.

“Please, Sect Leader Lan.” He made a gesture to talk.

“As for Wen RuoHan’s personal library, instead of burning it right away, would you mind if my brother would look through it first? He expressed his interests in some history books Wen RuoHan had and would like to take it back to the Cloud Recesses.”

“Ah, of course.” Jin GuangShan blinked, surprised. “I didn’t know your brother had such interests. Hanguang-Jun is the most talented.”

“WangJi’s interests are far and wide indeed.” Lan XiChen smiled.

“Then of course, Second Young Master Lan is allowed to take anything he wishes, as long as they are not shared amongst others as well. I know the Lan Sect collects rare texts and they take very good care not to have them exposed to anyone who is not part of the main family.”

“Thank you for your kindness, Sect Leader Jin.” Lan XiChen nodded. With this, Jin GuangShan turned away, beginning to talk about different kinds of possessions and

answering questions. Lan JingYi leaned over.

“ZeWu-Jun, didn’t you say Lan SiZhui could also look through them?”

“After what played out with the accusations towards Lan SiZhui, it would be best if we didn’t say he wants to read Wen RuoHan’s manuals. But I’m sure if WangJi brought a helper to finish going through the collection sooner, they wouldn’t turn him away.” He smiled at them, and Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Thank you, Sect Leader Lan.”

“SiZhui, how many times do I have to ask you to address me more casually?” Lan XiChen shook his head with a fond smile.

“ZeWu-Jun, the truth is I’ve known you for a very long time. It is hard for me to address you differently.” Lan SiZhui admitted.

“Friends!” Jin GuangShan clapped his hands suddenly, standing. “With this, our discussion here ends. Naturally, we cannot end it on such a serious note, so I’d like to share some good news as well. As the Sect Leader of the LanlingJin Sect, I’d like to invite everyone to Koi Tower this fall. We have decided as a thanks and reward, the Jin Sect will host the Phoenix Mountain Crowd Hunt again. So dear friends, please make sure you participate. You are all invited and the most welcome on the Hunt.”

At this, many people cheered.

## Casuistry III.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“How dare they!” Jin Ling fumed as they headed back to their sleeping quarters. Lan SiZhui sighed, knowing what the other referred to.

“It isn’t their fault. Wen Chao sounded convincing and they do not know me.”

“That shouldn’t give them the right to accuse you. My uncle—well, both of them, but Jiang Cheng mainly, always disliked the Jin. I knew there was always bad blood between them, but I hardly knew why. Now, I understand.” He huffed. “Jin ZiXun is my father’s cousin, my grandfather’s late brother’s son. I’ve worked with him briefly during the Sunshot Campaign and he always had the air of arrogance around him and he was always prone to badmouth other Sects. I just didn’t think he would have the audacity to speak up like that.”

“Who in the Jin Sect doesn’t have audacity?” Lan JingYi noted, bitter. “Even you make inappropriate comments all the time.”

“Says the rudest Lan who isn’t afraid to speak his mind?” Jin Ling threw back, but before they could continue, they were stopped by someone calling their names behind them. As they turned, they saw Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue heading their way.

“Sect Leaders.” The boys bowed and the two inclined their head in acknowledgement.

“We need to talk.” Nie MingJue said.

“Lan SiZhui.” Another voice called, and as they looked over, they spotted Lan WangJi standing not far, hands behind his back, looking at him expectantly. Once he spotted his brother with the boys, he also came closer, his brows furrowing slightly.

“WangJi.” Lan XiChen greeted his brother, who bowed to him. “Ah, right, the books.” He said before Lan WangJi could say anything. “We need to speak with Lan SiZhui in private. It will only take a few minutes. Go on your own, I’ll send him after you.” Lan WangJi’s brows furrowed further and he looked disapprovingly at his brother. Lan XiChen sighed. “I’ll tell you as much as I can later.” He said lowly.

“In your dreams!” Jin Ling snapped. “I cannot tell Jin ZiXuan, but you can to him?!”

“That’s not what I meant.” Lan XiChen shook his head. “I’ll tell you. In private.” He pointedly looked around. Jin Ling glared at him angrily. Lan XiChen sighed again. “Can we just go and talk? I’ll explain.” He said to Jin Ling, who rolled his eyes and with a flick of his sleeves, headed off towards the main office. Lan XiChen looked after him, then shook his head and turned back to his brother. “WangJi, we will talk later. Go along, I’ll send SiZhui after you.” Lan WangJi didn’t look pleased, in fact, he looked slightly annoyed and angry. He turned and walked away without a word.

“Let’s go.” Said Nie MingJue, also turning and walking away. Lan XiChen heaved yet another sigh, then gestured the two Lan disciples to follow him.

As they walked towards the main office, they passed Jin GuangShan and Jin GuangYao, who had been standing around, discussing something. Seeing Lan XiChen with his disciples, clearly hurrying somewhere, they didn’t stop them to chat. They inclined their heads, stopping their conversation to look after the Lan Sect Leader and his two disciples. Lan SiZhui glanced back one more time once they’ve reached the main office, but only saw Jin GuangShan, walking away, Jin GuangYao nowhere to be seen.

Inside, Lan XiChen silenced the room.

“So, what’s so urgent?” Jin Ling asked, crossing his arms over his chest, annoyed.

“We are the thieves.” Nie MingJue said bluntly. The three juniors blinked at him. Lan XiChen took a deep breath, but didn’t sigh this time, only closed his eyes and held it for a beat, then let it out slowly.

“The documents Jin GuangShan accused the remaining Wen to have stolen are these.” Lan XiChen said, gesturing at the pile of scrolls that held countless conversations between the three boys. Lan JingYi’s eyes widened.

“How do you know?” Jin Ling asked with a frown.

“I’ve asked Jin GuangYao. He said the documents that were stolen were present during the battle with Wen RuoHan in the reception hall, then taken back to the back room where we took them from. MingJue said these were the only documents present at the time. It is also suspicious that this had been revealed only after we’ve stolen the documents.”

“Did you really steal these?” Lan SiZhui asked hardly believing his ears. Jin Ling snorted.

“After JingYi and MingJue said these existed, I knew they had to be taken away.” Lan XiChen pressed his lips together, looking ashamed.

“The directory is amongst them?” Lan JingYi asked, eyes wide. Jin Ling groaned.

“There is no such thing as a directory! Or do you think anyone worked for the Wen of us? How stupid are you?”

“Well, you did say Su She made a deal with them.” Lan JingYi answered defensively.

“He made a deal with Wen Xu or Wen Chao to save his hide, not more than a favor for a favor. There’s no point recording that. Besides, Wen RuoHan was a careful man. These reports were needed because the spy birds couldn’t have relayed the information to him directly, so Wen Chao made these reports, but even if Wen RuoHan had spies, he must’ve not kept a record of them. That would be foolish.”

“So, you’re saying Jin GuangShan lied?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“I know it must be a shock, but people lie.” Jin Ling told him.



“I know that!” Lan JingYi snapped. “But Jin GuangShan is a Sect Leader. He is supposed to be righteous.”

“Wasn’t my uncle supposed to be righteous as well?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Wasn’t Wen RuoHan supposed to be righteous? I know you see ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun as some kind of gods, but even they lie and steal, apparently. Don’t hold people in such high regards, or you’ll just suffer when you realize they’re not what you made them out to be.”

“Jin GuangShan might not have lied.” Lan SiZhui quickly inserted before Lan JingYi could throw a jab at Jin Ling about his family. “From what I’ve gathered of the past, he was a lazy Sect Leader, but he had good intentions. He did not act during the war because he didn’t want his Sect to be in danger.”

“Lan SiZhui, your naivety truly astonishes me.” Jin Ling turned his glare at him now. “While I agree that he might not be in the wrong right now, he did not stay complacent because he was trying to protect his Sect. After all, if that would have been the issue, would he have let his son go? No, he was simply afraid of political backlash, that’s why he didn’t go.”

“But if he didn’t lie, why did he say that then?” Lan JingYi asked, brows furrowed.

“Jin GuangShan wouldn’t have time to look through the papers, so it must’ve been my uncle who told him that’s what those documents were. I knew it.” He threw up his hands. “I knew he was going to be a problem later.”

“You still haven’t told us why are you so suspicious of Jin GuangYao. What had he done in the future to gain such mistrust?” Nie MingJue narrowed his eyes at them.

“Didn’t he kill one of your subordinates? Didn’t you kick him out of your Sect?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue. “You have no more reason to trust him than we do. Why are you so insistent on this?”

“I might not trust him, but ever since the battle of Nightless City, you’ve been awfully accusatory towards him, and I want to know what he did in the future to gain such distrust from his own nephew.”

“He tried to kill me!” Jin Ling snapped. “That’s why I don’t trust him, alright?”

“Jin Ling—” Lan SiZhui began, but Jin Ling talked over him.

“You needn’t to know why, nor do you need to know other things that will happen in the future. You weren’t even supposed to know. So, Sect Leader Nie, with all due respect, leave us alone already.” He glared at the other, who looked back at him furiously. Lan SiZhui and Lan XiChen both closed their eyes briefly before stepping up to them.

“Alright, that’s enough.” Lan XiChen said. “MingJue, I told you already. The boys know what they’re doing. Mostly. Please, don’t push this.”

“You might be complacent not acting, but if the future is so troublesome they came back, how can we stand by idly?”

“Sect Leader Nie, I also thought I should change everything drastically, yet no matter what we change, the past stubbornly remains mostly unchanged. The little changes we manage to make are important. If I tell you and you start acting on your own, who knows what you mess up we’ve managed to accomplish?” Jin Ling huffed. “You and everyone here has this hero complex. How about you leave things to someone else for once? We can manage this, we’ve *been* managing this on our own for the past year.”

Nie MingJue watched him with narrowed eyes and for a long time, nobody spoke, awaiting his argument. However, Nie MingJue didn’t give one, just moved his jaw around a bit, then turned and gestured at the pile of reports on the table.

“Then what do we do with this, MouShi?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed, rolled his eyes, but otherwise didn’t react to the title.

“Burn them as planned. Nobody knows it was you who took them and in light of bigger things, they will forget about them easily. There was no need to panic about these.” He paused, then turned to Lan XiChen. “What I want to know rather, just what do you plan on telling Lan WangJi?”

Lan XiChen nodded, anticipating the question. “WangJi isn’t going to push even if I tell him I wouldn’t answer, though he would find out one way or another, or resent me for the rest of our lives. Since he knows we’ve worked close together during the Sunshot Campaign, it wouldn’t be suspicious to tell him we’ve been discussing matters related to the war.” He paused and they waited.

“That’s it?” Jin Ling asked when it became clear Lan XiChen wouldn’t continue.

“As I said, WangJi isn’t one to push issues. He knows we have worked behind the scenes as well as on the battlefield and he will know this isn’t anything sinister. That will be enough to him.”

“He would accept just like that?” Jin Ling cocked a skeptical eyebrow. Lan XiChen smiled a little somberly.

“WangJi knows I have Sect issues I cannot tell him. I’m Sect Leader, after all. If he wouldn’t have found the Yin Iron, I wouldn’t have told him about it either until it was necessary. These are things he is aware I cannot tell just anyone. He also knows I wouldn’t do anything to harm the Sect. That has to be enough.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“It will be.” Lan XiChen repeated with confidence. Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“And if it isn’t?” He repeated as well. “No offense Sect Leader Lan, but I don’t share your confidence. Secrets tend to have a bad effect on you. Are you sure you won’t spill, even if he pushes?”

“As I said, he isn’t the type to push.” Lan XiChen said, and Lan SiZhui discovered some annoyance in his voice. “It will be fine.”

“Right. If it isn’t, then you must tell him not to poke his nose into this. He is not good at staying out of other people’s business.” Lan XiChen sighed, nodding with an annoyed expression.

“Since when?” Lan JingYi murmured, and Jin Ling rounded on him.

“Since he silenced me on Dafan Mountain, since he interfered with our night-hunt in Yi City —”

“You call that night-hunt?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“No matter. The point is, whatever happens, he is always there. I don’t want him to be now. He has to stay out of this, or else—”

“Or else?” Lan JingYi cocked an eyebrow.

“Or else—! I’m Sect Leader, what can’t I do?!” Jin Ling exclaimed in annoyance and Lan SiZhui looked heavenward.

“Sect Leader?” Nie MingJue asked behind him. Jin Ling turned and glared at him.

“It’s none of your business. Don’t eavesdrop on other people’s conversations.”

“He’s standing *right there*. How could he *not* hear?” Lan JingYi muttered.

“Could you stop arguing for two minutes?” Lan SiZhui asked. Lan JingYi turned to him.

“SiZhui, he’s so stupid!”

“Isn’t there a rule against insulting other people when they’re standing right here?!” Jin Ling asked, kicking Lan JingYi lightly.

“There is. I’m going to propose we make exceptions for the rules. ‘Don’t insult other people, unless it’s Jin RuLan!’”

“You dare!” Jin Ling cried, and reached for Lan JingYi, who danced out of the way, behind Lan SiZhui.

“Don’t hit, don’t hit! We’re injured!” Lan JingYi cried.

“Then a broken neck won’t be out of place!”

“Enough!” Lan SiZhui snapped, glaring at Jin Ling, and would’ve at Lan JingYi as well if he wasn’t standing behind him. The two boys’ arguing was usually harmless and somewhat even entertaining, but lately they’ve been more than a handsome. Lan SiZhui was kind of tired of it.

“Boys.” Lan XiChen interrupted. “While you’re from the future and technically I’m not the same Lan XiChen who will be your Sect Leader, I’m still the Lan Sect Leader. Please, behave.” The strict tone was slightly out of place, it wasn’t often that Lan SiZhui heard Lan

XiChen lose his patience. It happened a few times in the past in his childhood, especially with Lan WangJi when he was especially stubborn about something. The strange tone from the Lan Sect Leader also got the other two boys' attentions and they turned, looking only slightly ashamed.

"If that's all, I think we can all go back to our duties." Lan XiChen said, slightly calmer, then turned to Lan SiZhui. "I doubt he will ask, but if WangJi wants to know what we've discussed—"

"I will say it is related to the war and send him to you with his questions." Lan XiChen nodded with a faint smile.

"Jin Ling, Lan JingYi, I know the two of you are not good at not doing anything, but I must ask that the two of you don't get in trouble while we're here. Tension is still running high and many Sects and Clans are here. It wouldn't look good if you got caught sneaking around."

"You can't tell me what to do." Jin Ling frowned.

"Indeed, that's why I'm asking, not telling you." Lan XiChen said.

"Fine." Jin Ling said. "I'm tired anyways. Lan SiZhui, we will meet at dinner?" he looked at the other Lan, who nodded. Jin Ling returned it, then turned and walked out of the room. Lan JingYi exchanged a look with Lan SiZhui, then he also left.

"I'll lead you to Wen RuoHan's quarters." Lan XiChen said, gesturing. Nie MingJue stayed behind, watching them until the door closed behind them.

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It was dark and hot in Wen RuoHan's sleeping chambers. It was also occupied, Jin GuangShan opening the door for them and smiling, inviting the two of them for tea. Lan XiChen joined, so Lan SiZhui also followed in suit.

There were three main rooms to the sleeping chambers, only one of them being the library. The décor was what Lan SiZhui was used to, being in Nightless City for so long. Wen RuoHan's chambers were richly decorated with red sheer curtains hanging from the ceiling. There was a sitting area after entering, then a low table in a comfortable setting, probably for the family to sit and have a tea at. Behind another archway was the bed, concealed by even more red sheer curtains. Red flowers decorated the table and the tea set was an expensive, pure white one, the delicacy of the handcraft obvious. The door to the library was to the left, and to the right was another area Lan SiZhui didn't see to, so he wasn't sure what it was, though he had guesses.

Jin GuangShan directed the two of them to the table and had them sit. As soon as they were seated, three servants appeared from thin air, serving the tea.

"Sect Leader Lan, what can I do for you?" Jin GuangShan asked, once tea was poured. He made a gesture as if adjusting his sleeve, but at this, the three servants disappeared to wherever they came from.

“WangJi came by earlier to look through the books we’ve talked about.” Lan XiChen began and Jin GuangShan nodded. His expression was open and interested. Lan SiZhui had a hard time believing this man was as horrible as they said. He thought the Sect Leader was rather... nice.

“Yes, he is here. Unfortunately, he refused to have a tea with me. It is fine. He was always very focused on his studies.” Jin GuangShan said with a small laugh and Lan SiZhui smiled at that.

“I thought I’d offer SiZhui’s help. As you know, he had access to the entire Lan library in the past, and even if WangJi’s memory is excellent, it is better to have two heads than one while sorting through so many titles.”

“Ah, that’s very generous of you, Sect Leader Lan.” Jin GuangShan smiled warmly at Lan XiChen. He then turned to Lan SiZhui. “ChunYu-Jun, I hope you’re feeling better since last night.”

“Ah, yes, Sect Leader Jin, thank you.” Lan SiZhui nodded, sipping the tea. It was naturally sweet, perhaps some kind of hibiscus blend Lan SiZhui wasn’t familiar with. He found the taste a bit too sweet for him.

“That’s good to hear, that’s good to hear.” Jin GuangShan nodded. “I know tension was high during the discussion, but I don’t want this to cause tension between us as well. ZeWu-Jun, ChunYu-Jun, I apologize if I offended you in any way.”

“Ah, Sect Leader Jin, it is fine if you want to apologize to Lan—ZeWu-Jun, but why apologize to me?” Lan SiZhui blinked, surprised. The question slipped out without intention, he knew it was rude to speak before Lan XiChen could accept the apology. He looked at Lan XiChen wide-eyed, but the Lan Sect Leader didn’t seem to mind, he himself looking at Jin GuangShan curiously.

“Well, your family are the Wen, are they not?” Jin GuangShan laughed awkwardly, confused. “I—Well, my son suspects Sect Leader Lan requested this decision to be made publicly so you—ah, but what am I implying, forgive me, my mouth got better of me again.” He seemed ashamed. Lan SiZhui didn’t understand. Lan XiChen put down his cup, the ceramic making a small sound as it met the wood of the table.

“Sect Leader Jin, no need to apologize. Jin GuangYao is right. I asked you to postpone the decision making because I wanted Lan SiZhui to be present. I already knew he didn’t want the Wen to get unjust treatment and was afraid if we made the decision on our own so soon after the war, our emotions would get the better of us and we would decide on something that would not have fit the righteousness our Sects stand for. I also planned for the occasion if the opposing side’s voice is louder, that if we make this decision publicly, I might be able to find some people who also agree with Lan SiZhui on this matter. I admit, for this scheme I also have to apologize, for I planned on forcing your hand, would you deny us.” He bowed his head and Jin GuangShan seemed taken aback. He then smiled and shook his head.

“There’s no need to apologize, for I planned on doing the same. Sect Leader Lan, this is politics. I admit I didn’t think you have enough experience to do this, I stand corrected. I

apologize for my assumption.” He paused, then continued, a renewed delight obvious in his voice. “Ah, I must admit, Sect Leader Lan, it is very good to be able to talk to you like this! In the past, while your father was the Sect Leader, then, when you weren’t of age yet, I always dealt with GusuLan elders who were wise but... cold and intimidating. I feel like after talking to you like this for just a few short minutes, we could be good friends!”

Lan XiChen just inclined his head, but his smile was not the warm, genuine smile Lan SiZhui often saw on his face, but a polite, empty one that he reserved for people he didn’t like but had no choice in dealing with them.

“While we talk, why don’t ChunYu-Jun go and help out Hanguang-Jun?” Jin GuangShan asked, turning to him. “ChunYu-Jun, don’t think I don’t want you here, but Sect Leader Lan and I will talk of politics, something surely such a renowned cultivator as yourself isn’t interested in. When you visit MouShi in Koi Tower in the future however, you must stop by and have a tea with me.”

“Ah, thank you, Sect Leader Jin.” Lan SiZhui stood and bowed respectfully to the Sect Leader. “I’ll go to Hanguang-Jun then.” He told Lan XiChen and bowed to him as well. Lan XiChen nodded, though the message in his eyes was clear – be careful.

“This way, please.” A servant stepped up to him and led him out of the main chamber and to the door leading to the library. It wasn’t as big as Lan SiZhui thought it was going to be. A circular space enough for five grown man to stand in, a small table in the middle. All over the walls on shelves were books, stacked to the brim. There was a lantern hanging from the ceiling, the only source of light in the little room. Lan WangJi was sitting at the small table. In front of him, taking up the rest of the tabletop were three stacks of books. As Lan SiZhui left the main chamber, he heard the beginning of Lan XiChen and Jin GuangShan’s conversation:

“So, Sect Leader Lan, how are girls in the Cloud Recesses? Are you courting anyone in the moment?”

Thankfully, he didn’t hear anything else, for as soon as the library door closed behind him, the sounds got muffled and hard to make out. Lan WangJi looked up when he entered. As the door closed, Lan SiZhui bowed to him.

“Hanguang-Jun, I’m here to help.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded. He gestured at the table. “This is the pile we bring back, this one for books I couldn’t decide and this that we won’t take.” He said, then returned to the book he held in his hand. Lan SiZhui nodded and went over to one of the shelves, picking a book and going to sit at the table across Lan WangJi, beginning the long process of going through the entire collection.

They worked well in silence, the only sound the muffled voices outside, the occasional laugh and exclamation. It sounded like Jin GuangShan had a good time with Lan XiChen, though the other Sect Leader’s quiet, deep voice couldn’t be heard as often as his. Eventually, the voices faded to the background as Lan SiZhui read, not paying attention to them anymore.

Lan SiZhui was leafing through a strangely bound book when his gaze caught on something. He blinked and went back to the beginning of the sentence, reading it over. By the time he confirmed his suspicion, he'd read two pages. He closed the book and looked up, finding Lan WangJi watching him. The other didn't say anything, just looked down at the book in Lan SiZhui's hand interested, then reached over and took it, opening it at the page Lan SiZhui was reading. By the time he finished, there was a furrow between his brows.

"I don't understand." Lan WangJi said. "Are Wen ZhuLiu's powers not unique?"

"When he told me about his childhood, he said his Clan, the Zhao Clan was attacked by western tribes. Wen RuoHan helped out and took in the Zhao survivors. They battled against the western tribes and as they brought back booty, some books were among them as well. Wen ZhuLiu was in charge of looking through them and found this manual." He nodded towards the book. "Wen RuoHan rewarded him for finding it by letting him learn. But... Wen ZhuLiu gave the impression that after he learned it, the manual had been destroyed." Lan SiZhui frowned.

"Wen RuoHan kept it." Lan SiZhui nodded.

"Hanguang-Jun, what if with this, we can find a cure to restore those cultivators' meridians whose Core had been crushed?" Lan SiZhui asked hopefully.

"Mn." Lan WangJi nodded, then pulled out his qiankun pouch from his robes and put the book inside. Lan SiZhui looked on, confused. "Jin GuangShan will check what books we took. If he sees it, he will think we intend to use it for evil and will force us to give over. It cannot fall into the wrong hands. It's better to hide."

"Ah, Hanguang-Jun, I should hide it then." Lan SiZhui offered. "If they find it on me, they will just say I'm corrupted. If they find it on you..."

"They will realize I wouldn't use it for wicked tricks." Lan WangJi said, and it almost felt like a pointed jab, but Lan SiZhui couldn't decide. He nodded.

They kept looking through the books. As soon as Lan SiZhui found Wen Mao's records, he put them in the pile to take back, but then he paused and hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Lan WangJi asked when Lan SiZhui didn't take a new book to look over.

"Ah... I was just thinking that... These records belong to the Wen Sect. Even if there's no survivors, they shouldn't be taken away. Is it right to take these books?"

"We're not taking them to destroy and hide. We're taking them to preserve and study them."

"That's true, but still. Maybe we could give it to relatives of the Wen?"

"Like your cousins?"

"They're the only ones I know but that doesn't mean they're the only relatives of Wen RuoHan left." He said with a shrug. Lan WangJi sighed.

“After the dust had settled we will find them and return them.” He nodded and Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“Thank you, Hanguang-Jun.”

They kept working in a peaceful silence, until Lan SiZhui noted the quiet went on for too long. He looked up from his book and listened, but the muffled voices were gone. Did Jin GuangShan and Lan XiChen leave? They must’ve, for there wasn’t even the sound of teacups anymore. Lan SiZhui shook his head and returned to the books.

It was a servant who notified them it was time to go. By then, it was dark outside and the two of them looked through about a third of the books inside. They left everything as it was, then followed the servant who was tasked to take them back to their quarters. Once there, Lan SiZhui said goodnight to Lan WangJi, who then headed towards his brother’s sleeping quarters at the end of the courtyard. Lan SiZhui watched him knock on the door then gain entry. He closed the door behind him and was gone. Lan SiZhui sighed, then turned to go to his own rooms.

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Inside, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were already waiting. They were sitting at the low table and there was an old, beat-up Weiqi board between them. The stones were mismatched. Lan SiZhui watched as they played for a second, then entered and closed the door behind him, which made the two look up.

“Finally!” Jin Ling exclaimed, then picked up a stone and put it on the board.

“This is what you’ve been thinking of for five minutes now?!” Lan JingYi exclaimed. “You could’ve done this turns ago!”

“I didn’t want to beat you because then you’d want to play a new round!” Jin Ling said. “Forget the stupid game. SiZhui, your dinner is here.” He pushed the board away and pulled a bowl from the side, setting it up at the third side of the table, clearly not intending to move from his own spot.

“Sorry I took long.” Lan SiZhui said as he got settled.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Five more minutes and I’d have left.”

“I’m not that bad of a company!” Lan JingYi complained.

“You are.” Jin Ling said and Lan SiZhui sighed, shaking his head. He ignored the two as he began his dinner.

Once he was finished, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling asked him about his afternoon, so Lan SiZhui told them everything.

“What do you mean Jin GuangShan isn’t so bad?” Jin Ling scoffed. “He is worse than my uncle!”



“Hush, I want to hear the rest.” Lan JingYi told him and Jin Ling glared.

“Don’t you hush me again, I swear I will break your legs.” This time the threat sounded serious, but Lan JingYi just rolled his eyes, turning to Lan SiZhui, who then began telling them the rest.

“You found the book Wen ZhuLiu learned his powers from?” Jin Ling exclaimed once he heard this. “Why didn’t you burn it right away?! Do you know how dangerous this is?”

“I do.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “We want to study it first, to see if its effects can be reversed.”

“It obviously cannot. If it was possible, don’t you think the Sects would’ve used this knowledge to save the people Wen ZhuLiu attacked?” He frowned. “Just burn the damned book. The world doesn’t need another Wen ZhuLiu. Get rid of it right away.”

“We need to study it first.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “If we don’t find anything, I promise I will personally set it on fire.”

“I don’t care.” Jin Ling snapped. “I hate it. Get rid of it. What if someone sees it and decides they could be as strong and feared as Wen ZhuLiu? There’s a good reason my grandfather wanted to burn the whole library. Wen RuoHan was a vile person with vile ideas. Just because you think it might save someone or another, doesn’t mean it should remain in this world.”

“This might save people.” Lan JingYi argued. “I thought you also wanted that.”

“I do, but I’d rather practice medicine for the rest of my life to save them than this! Why is it that whenever you have an idea, we should listen to it, but when I say something it’s ignored?!” Jin Ling exclaimed, clearly upset.

“Why are you so scared?” Lan JingYi frowned. “I found it odd before the battle as well. You’re really scared of Wen ZhuLiu, but I don’t understand why. What has he ever done to you? Do you have yet another uncle whose Core was crushed or something? You said you have a personal grudge against him. What is it?”

At this, Jin Ling slapped the table and stood, turning his back to them. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look.

“Jin Ling?” Lan SiZhui asked hesitantly.

“It’s nothing. It doesn’t matter anymore.” Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared another look.

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter anymore? Is there something you’ve been keeping from us?” Lan JingYi asked, leaning forward.

“I told you it doesn’t matter, why do you keep pushing?!” Jin Ling snapped, turning back to glare at Lan JingYi.

“You’re really touchy about this subject, so naturally, I’m worried.” Lan JingYi snapped back. “If you tell us what bothers you so much about this, we can help.”

“You cannot help!” Jin Ling told him. “Since it doesn’t matter anyways, just drop it!”

“I don’t like that you keep secrets from us. We’re in this together, so why are you holding back?”

“There are things you don’t understand.” Jin Ling told him. “I’m a Sect Leader and you’re just... you. How could you understand this?”

“How would I know if you don’t tell us?!”

“I said drop it, so drop it!”

“Jin Ling, JingYi. Please, don’t fight.” Lan SiZhui tried to placate.

“He’s the one who can’t let go!”

“You’re the one who won’t say!”

“Because I made an oath not to tell anyone!” Jin Ling finally shouted, throwing up his hands. “Can I do just this one favor for my uncles, or will you keep being noisy?!”

“Your uncles?” Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui glanced at each other, then back at Jin Ling. “What does Jiang WanYin and Wei WuXian have to do with this?” Lan JingYi asked, confused.

“You’re not listening.” Jin Ling said. “I won’t tell you.”

“Both their Cores are fine, so that can’t be it—” Before Lan JingYi could continue, Jin Ling picked up his sword and stormed out of the room. “Did I say something wrong?” Lan JingYi blinked after him. Lan SiZhui sighed and shook his head.

“JingYi, please, don’t ask Jin Ling about this anymore. Clearly, he doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“He’s the one who hates secrets, yet he keeps them so close to his chest. He’s truly his uncle’s nephew.” Lan SiZhui glared at him.

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m not trying to insult him, but you have to admit, he’s acting really weird about this.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “But that doesn’t mean we should push him to tell us. He made an oath. Let us respect it.”

“I just thought we were friends. Turns out, MouShi still thinks he’s so much better than us.” Lan JingYi chewed his lower lip as he busied his hands with the tea. Lan SiZhui looked at him sadly. He didn’t know how this situation got out of hand so quickly. They were just having a chat a few minutes prior. He sighed and told Lan JingYi gently:

“Jin Ling is trying. He’s changed a lot since we got to know him. It must be difficult for him now, seeing his uncle in the Jin Sect again. He must be worried about his father and also about his mother with Senior Wei practicing demonic cultivation again. Please, understand that he’s in a difficult situation right now.”

“I understand it all.” Lan JingYi said. “I just don’t understand then why won’t he talk to us about it? We open up to him about what burdens us all the time and for the most part, he’s not being horrible about it either. Why doesn’t he think we would do the same?”

“It probably doesn’t help that you insult and tease him all the time and keep pushing when he’s asking you to stop.” Lan SiZhui told him apologetically.

“Then what should I do? Be nice to him? You know how he is about that.” Lan JingYi made a helpless gesture. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“Maybe don’t taunt him for a few days now. Just... Don’t react mockingly to every single word of his?”

“How do I do that?” Lan JingYi frowned at him. “He’s just too easy to tease!”

“He’s three years our junior.” Lan SiZhui told him. “You’re very good with your juniors, Hanguang-Jun is always pleased when you take charge on night-hunts. Why don’t you try to handle him like that?” Lan SiZhui suggested and Lan JingYi made a face.

“The Lan juniors are obedient and nice.”

“Just try.” He pleaded, then something came to mind. “When we arrived and I talked to ZeWu-Jun about the argument Jin Ling and I had about whether change the past or not, ZeWu-Jun told me: *‘Relationships are not easy and effortless. They take a lot of work on both ends.’*” He patted Lan JingYi’s hand. “Work hard to handle Jin Ling and your relationship won’t be damaged by your fights.”

“I guess.” Lan JingYi muttered. “It would be easier if he was a normal person who knew how to apologize or whom you could apologize to.” Lan SiZhui didn’t point out this was exactly the kind of thing Lan JingYi should avoid saying, and just patted his hand again, lips pressed together and he poured himself a fresh cup of tea.



The next day Lan SiZhui began in Wen RuoHan’s library by Lan WangJi’s side. They haven’t found anything else that they didn’t expect to find, so they made quick work, finishing the collection by the time lunch rolled around. As they exited the rooms, they found the oddest couple waiting for them in the courtyard; Jin Ling and Wei WuXian standing side-by-side. Jin Ling had his arms crossed over his chest, his expression grave, while Wei WuXian was leaning against a tree, spinning his flute in his hand.

“Ah, Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian grinned, then waved at them. “SiZhui, we’ve been waiting for you forever!”

“We’ve arrived five minutes ago.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“As I said, forever.” Wei WuXian grinned at him. “I wanted to have lunch with Lan Zhan and MouShi wanted to have lunch with SiZhui. Since we’re sworn brothers, why don’t the four of us have lunch together?”

“We’re not sworn brothers.” Jin Ling shook his head in annoyance. “It wasn’t a proper ceremony, you just needed another excuse to drink.”

“Then let’s have one!” Wei WuXian proposed. “We’ve worked closely together in the past several months and even before that. We’re as close as brothers. Why not make it official?”

“You just heard Lan XiChen, Jin ZiXuan and Nie MingJue will swear brotherhood this afternoon and wanted in.” Jin Ling looked away, annoyed.

“They will?” Lan SiZhui blinked at him, surprised.

“Yes.” Jin Ling told him. “I heard it this morning.”

“With Young Master Jin?”

“Mn.” Jin Ling nodded.

“That’s good news, isn’t it?” Lan SiZhui watched Jin Ling closely to see his reaction. The other shrugged.

“Better than the other option. I don’t care as long as they’re alive.”

“It is unusual for sworn brotherhoods to involve one so much younger than them, though, I understand Sect Leader Nie and Lan as well.” Wei WuXian chimed in. “During the war, they had been the most active participants. The Jiang Sect was too occupied with our internal problems to involve ourselves deeply in the leadership.”

“I imagine Sect Leader Jiang also didn’t want to associate with Lan XiChen, now that he publicly defended Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling frowned.

“That’s not it.” Wei WuXian shook his head. “He doesn’t care about that. It’s simply just not advantageous for the Jiang Sect Leader to make such oaths at the moment. We still need to deal with the aftermath of the battle at Lotus Pier. Even though it wasn’t as severely affected as it could’ve been, we still took a serious hit.”

“I guess.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“Anyways, if they can swear brotherhood, why can’t we?” Wei WuXian looked over them. “Let’s do it.” He grinned.

“Who would want to be your sworn brother?” Jin Ling glared at him. “I have better things to do than playing around with you.”

“I didn’t know having lunch and yelling at people was an occupation.” Wei WuXian teased.

“Better than hanging out with you, isn’t it?” Jin Ling side-eyed him and Wei WuXian pouted. “I can break your legs, how about that? Isn’t that a worthy occupation of my time?”

“MouShi, you’re just like Jiang Cheng. He also says he doesn’t like me, he also wants to break my legs and complains about me, but in reality, he doesn’t hate me at all.” He grinned. Jin Ling looked heavenward. “Come on. Let’s do it, let’s swear brotherhood. You, me, Lan Zhan, Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jiang Cheng. Aren’t we a good team? Aren’t we the Six Heroes of the Sunshot Campaign? Let’s make it official.”

“I’m going to lunch.” Jin Ling told him, then turned around and headed towards the rooms.

“Hey! Don’t ignore me!” Wei WuXian called out and hurried after him. Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi shared a look and went after them.

In the courtyard where the rooms were located, another pair was waiting for them, Jiang Cheng and Lan JingYi. It seemed they’ve just ran into each other, and as they saw the four of them approach, they turned to them. Jin Ling froze upon seeing Lan JingYi, but then he just made an annoyed expression and crossed his arms over his chest, looking away. At least he stayed. Lan SiZhui counted that as a positive thing.

“Finally! Where have you been?” Jiang Cheng asked Wei WuXian. “You said we were going to have lunch, then you said you’re going out for five minutes.”

“Did you miss me?” Wei WuXian grinned as he threw an arm over Jiang Cheng’s shoulders.

“Who missed you?” Jiang Cheng elbowed him in the side. “This was an hour ago.”

“Were you worried then?”

“Sister made soup and got worried you wouldn’t arrive in time to eat.” Jiang Cheng told him.

“Ah, sister made soup?” Wei WuXian blinked. “I forgot I told you we were having lunch and went to find Lan Zhan to have lunch with.”

“If you don’t want to eat with me, just say that. You have to tell me you went to Lan WangJi instead?” Jiang Cheng seemed hurt by that. Wei WuXian pouted.

“Jiang Cheng, I didn’t mean to. I really forgot I said that. Let’s have lunch together, all six of us, okay? The others also like sister’s soup.”

“Sister’s soup is the best, of course they like it.” Jiang Cheng scoffed. “Fine, whatever. Let’s just eat already, I’m hungry.”

“We don’t want to intrude.” Lan SiZhui said. Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes at him.

“I said it was fine, didn’t I? Just come and eat with us. Don’t make a fuss. Are you going to reject as well, Hanguang-Jun?” Jiang Cheng cocked an eyebrow at the other, who inclined his head politely. “Then let’s go.” With this, Jiang Cheng turned around and headed towards their own rooms. It was in a different part of the Nightless city, and it was also livelier than the one where the Lan stayed at. Purple-clad disciples were having lunch outside at the tables, talking

and sharing their food. As the six of them entered, many called out to Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng in greeting and they nodded or waved back.

Jiang YanLi was arranging a table near the biggest room, presumably where the Sect Leader stayed. Jiang FengMian wasn't present though. Jiang YanLi bowed to them when she saw them approach and smiled. "Brothers, welcome. Are you going to have lunch with us today?"

"Lady Jiang, excuse us for the intrusion." Lan SiZhui bowed.

"It's alright. I made two pots, so there should be enough for everyone." Jiang YanLi smiled at him.

"Sister, why did you make an extra pot?" Jiang Cheng frowned.

"For our journey home in a few days. Don't worry, there's still time to make more."

"I'll help, since I brought guests over." Wei WuXian offered, but Jiang YanLi chuckled gently.

"A-Xian, it's alright. I can make it, don't trouble yourself."

"Truly, just don't make anything that goes into people's bodies, if you can help it." Lan JingYi asked as they all sat around the table. Wei WuXian frowned at him.

"I'll have you know, I'm a fine cook. People like my food."

"It's a disgrace to call your cooking food." Jiang Cheng said.

"Watch it." Wei WuXian elbowed him in the side and Jiang YanLi chuckled, hiding her smile behind her sleeve.

"Let's eat." She said, picking up Wei WuXian's pot and pouring him some soup. Wei WuXian grinned up at her brightly. Lan SiZhui smiled at the scene, glad to see Wei WuXian so happy. What he said to several people was true. He didn't regret taking Wei WuXian's place in the Burial Mounds. Even if he still turned to demonic cultivation, in Lan SiZhui's memories he was rarely as happy as he appeared now.

As he looked around the table, people arguing loudly, Jiang Cheng, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling teaming up to bully Wei WuXian, Wei WuXian ignoring them in order to tell a story to Lan WangJi who had an interested expression on, but said nothing for the sake of eating, Jiang YanLi who enjoyed the show, he wished it would stay forever like this.

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A few days later they left Nightless City. Since everything had been decided and distributed amongst the Sects, nobody felt like staying anymore and they went home instead. The smaller Clans and Sects headed out first. The Wen Sect's home that had been home for thousands in the past few days had emptied out. Walking amongst the corridors finally felt peaceful and serene.

The day before they left, the Jin Sect would bury those Wen who fell during the final battle and whose families they were unable to find. Since this was not a joyous occasion, nobody really went near the place in the back mountains where the Jin Sect dug the mass grave. Lan SiZhui only had Feixu in his hand and Hudie in his sleeve in a qiankun pouch. He came to pay his respects, not to pick fights, so he left everything else in his rooms. He didn't dare to actually go to the burial site. He knew how it would look. But while he was unable to publicly attend, he walked between the trees until he found a spot with a satisfactory view.

He watched as the Jin Sect's disciples argued about this and that. His lips pressed together when some of them mentioned they could just leave the bodies there to rot, but thankfully the general in charge was quick to shut them down. Surprised, Lan SiZhui saw it was Han Ming – Jin Ling's future archery teacher – who told them off and sent them back to dig. Once the grave was done, the bodies were tossed in carelessly. Lan SiZhui's hand tightened on Feixu as he watched.

He was aware of the company he had, but still startled somewhat when the first notes of a flute sounded out above him. The song was soft and melancholy, fitting the mood perfectly as the first shovelful dirt was tossed on the bodies. Lan SiZhui didn't mind it.

The sun was setting by the time they were finished, the Jin disciples drenched in sweat and congratulating each other for the job well done. The flute music that had been accompanying Lan SiZhui's sight faded. Lan SiZhui reached up and quickly wiped his face by the time Wei WuXian jumped down next to him from the branch he'd been sitting on.

"How about we go back and burn paper money?" He asked quietly. Lan SiZhui shook his head. "How about a drink then?" Wei WuXian bumped their shoulders together and Lan SiZhui smiled a little.

"I'm not sad for them."

"No?" Wei WuXian asked back, surprised.

"I'm sad for the future that will never know that despite all the evil the Wen Sect had done, there were good amongst them and once they were kind and respectable. In the future, everyone will end up hating them for Wen RuoHan's madness. Is it fair? Is it fair that orphans will grow up thinking their blood is dirty and their father's name brings shame on them?"

Wei WuXian said nothing. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and calmed himself.

"I don't know my parents' name." Lan SiZhui said after a while. "I don't... I was only a few years old when they died. Or so, I assume. To spare me, or because I wouldn't understand, the family I had before the Lan never told me about them. I was always just A-Yuan. Just a Wen orphan. I had people who cared for me and blood relatives, but... Did you know, until people started talking about who I was... A Lan disciple's illegitimate child, I believed I just sprouted from the ground like a plant?"

"What kind of plant?" Wei WuXian asked and Lan SiZhui glanced over at him. Wei WuXian grinned at him. "It's important. Were you edible?" Lan SiZhui chuckled.

“I was a radish.”

“That’s no good.” Wei WuXian pouted. “I don’t like radish. You should’ve been a carrot. Did you know there are bunnies in Cloud Recesses? They would’ve eaten you.”

“And that’s better?” Lan SiZhui asked with humor.

“We eat bunnies, it’s only fair if they eat us in return.” Wei WuXian nodded seriously, then both of them laughed.

“Brother Wei, don’t eat bunnies. Hanguang-Jun is fond of bunnies, he would take offense.”

“Ah, I’ll remember that.” Wei WuXian grinned with a nod. “Does he like fish?”

“Hanguang-Jun doesn’t eat meat.”

“You didn’t say he doesn’t like it.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed diplomatically. Wei WuXian laughed again.

“Let’s go back. It’s dark. I don’t want to trip on the way back.” He frowned. Lan SiZhui huffed, amused, then the two of them set out to return to the Nightless City.

There was a half-hearted banquet held this night, courtesy of the Jin Sect once again. This one wasn’t as important to attend to as the first one, nor was it shameful for an important disciple not to attend such as Lan SiZhui or Wei WuXian. Since anyone was welcome, many people gathered at the reception hall to attend, hoping to gain one Sect’s favor or another’s. Seeing the crowd gathered, Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian shared a look, then as if thinking the same, turned towards the inner courtyards.

They found a lonely table at the Jiang Sect’s quarters. The courtyard was nearly empty, only one group of people who were responsible to keeping guard remained, sitting at a table in one of the corners, two of them playing Weiqi while the others were watching.

As Wei WuXian entered the yard, they turned to him and bowed, though it was not as stiff as if the Sect Leader appeared. Wei WuXian didn’t mind, waving back half-heartedly before settling at a table with Lan SiZhui. As soon as they sat, one of the servants who had been sitting on a stool at the guards’ table jumped up and hurried over.

“Brother Wei, can I get you two anything?” He asked with a smile, relaxed, not at all how the usual servants asked. Lan SiZhui found he rather liked the Jiang Sect’s easygoing attitude. Wei WuXian smiled at the servant.

“HongGu, please bring us some wine and tea.” He asked softly and the servant, HongGu bowed shallowly, hurrying inside one of the side rooms. He was back moments later with a tray, bringing over a pot of tea and liquor with four cups.

“Anything else?”



“Go back to the game.” Wei WuXian shook his head with a smile and HongGu bowed to them, walking back at a relaxed pace. As soon as he was gone, Wei WuXian served the drinks, then lifted his cup to Lan SiZhui before downing his liquor. “Lan SiZhui, there’s some things we still haven’t talked about.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Wei WuXian sighed.

“You’re mad at me, aren’t you?”

“I’m not mad...” Lan SiZhui said, then sighed. “I’m mostly not mad. I’m just worried. This isn’t a safe path for you.”

“Neither is it for you.” Wei WuXian told him, playing with his cup. He looked over the rim at Lan SiZhui. “Look. What is done is done, there’s no point dwelling on the past. All we can do now is to adjust to the situation.”

“Since there’s no threat anymore, you can just drop it and not use demonic cultivation again.” Lan SiZhui requested so softly, it didn’t even sound like a request. Wei WuXian huffed, shaking his head.

“Even if there’s no threat now, who knows what the future holds. Jin GuangShan is still looking for the last shard and it is with us. This makes us a target.”

“Brother Wei, both you and Hanguang-Jun said ‘we both’ have the last shard. What does that mean exactly? I don’t have the other half of Stygian Tiger Amulet.”

“How did you know that’s what I call it?” Wei WuXian blinked at him, surprised. Lan SiZhui felt his face heat. Wei WuXian quickly dropped the topic though, shaking his head. “When we tried to escape the Wen and landed on the rooftop, do you remember?”

“Mn.”

“I slipped half of Stygian Tiger Amulet into your qiankun pouch.”

“But why?” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“I knew you or I would end up facing Wen RuoHan. I wasn’t sure which one of us though, so I gave you half of it, half of it I kept to myself.”

“I admit I used it to defeat Wen RuoHan. But after the battle, Jin Ling said it was gone.”

“It was gone?” Wei WuXian blinked at him.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I figured you took it?” Wei WuXian shook his head.

“I figured you hid it. Where could it have gone?” A horrible thought entered Lan SiZhui’s head, but that was impossible. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were by his side. If anyone, they surely didn’t let Jin GuangYao near him... right? “How did you use it?” Wei WuXian unexpectedly asked. “Maybe you somehow exhausted it and destroyed it. Though if that was the case, it would have had a great backlash and through the other half, I’d have sensed it.

Perhaps the other shards reacted to it? But then, the Yin Iron would've joined into one..." As Wei WuXian muttered to himself, Lan SiZhui also thought.

Jin Ling said Nie MingJue destroyed three shards with Baxia. Lan SiZhui had the shards in his qiankun pouch. He put them away with his guqin once he realized what effect they had on Wen Chao. Before he picked up the shards, he only used the Stygian Tiger Amulet. It was almost like it attached itself to Lan SiZhui's guqin. It was illogical for it to have gone missing between the time Lan SiZhui bagged his guqin and Jin Ling taking it out.

Suddenly, he had a thought and pulled out Hudie. In the faint lantern light the dark cherry color of the guqin looked pitch black. Hudie was an imposing weapon indeed, gentle and fierce, beautiful and terrifying. Lan SiZhui ran his fingertips over the strings. He hadn't played on the instrument since the battle, but Lan JingYi had. Hudie was also cared for while he was healing.

Lan SiZhui plucked a string. The guqin made the sound then quieted. He tried again, with the same result, then took a deep breath and played some very low-level notes.

As the strings resonated, faint energy, almost impossible to detect seeped from Hudie. Lan SiZhui slapped his palm on the strings to stop their play.

"The Yin Iron... merged with you guqin?" Wei WuXian leaned closer, reaching out and running his fingers over the metal plate at the head of the instrument, tracing the characters carved into it. "This means Hudie became a resentful spiritual tool." He said, leaning back and watching Lan SiZhui carefully. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and nodded.

Lan SiZhui bagged Hudie, tucking the pouch close to his chest, feeling sentimental.

"Now what?" Lan SiZhui wondered out loud. Wei WuXian hummed, rubbing his nose thoughtfully.

"Well, there's nothing to be done now." He said slowly. "Once two spiritual tools merge, they're impossible to take apart. The precept is this: Yang Wu, a regular cultivator lost his disciple brother in a fight against their enemy, Fu Yu. He grieved greatly, swearing to take revenge for his brother by using his sword. He went to confront Fu Yu, but the other was stronger than him and Yang Wu quickly lost his confidence. Not being familiar with his disciple brother's sword, Yang Wu also pulled out his own. Little did he know that if he used both spiritual tools to attack Fu Yu, they would not only combine their powers momentarily, but also merge into one another. In the end, Yang Wu won, but his sword was fused with the other. Not being able to use it like this, he tried to take the two apart. In the end, he took it to a forge where they separated the blades, but in the end, both lost their ability to carry spiritual power."

"So, Hudie will remain resentful unless I'm willing to sacrifice both it and the Yin Iron?" Lan SiZhui asked and Wei WuXian nodded.

"You could try to cleanse it, just in case, but this shard is especially strong. I don't know if it will react positively to the attempt." Lan SiZhui nodded.

“That’s fine.” He said. “As long as I don’t use it to cultivate, that should be fine. I just wonder why it didn’t react when Lan JingYi played on it.”

Wei WuXian hummed. “There are two possible answers. One of them is that resentful energy, specifically the Yin Iron’s, needs intent to activate. If Lan JingYi wanted to heal you not hurt you, the Yin Iron should’ve remained dormant.”

“And the other possibility?” Wei WuXian made a sour face.

“The other option is that the Stygian Tiger Amulet accepted you as its master.”

“I’ve only used it once.” Lan SiZhui frowned. “And it is your spiritual tool.” Wei WuXian nodded.

“Which is why I don’t think that’s the answer. It’s most likely just intent.” Lan SiZhui nodded and they were quiet for a pause, then he looked up at Wei WuXian.

“Brother Wei. Why did you begin practicing this? I thought we were doing fine without demonic cultivation, that’s why I dropped it as soon as we arrived to Lotus Pier.” Wei WuXian sighed.

“Lan SiZhui, it’s not that I purposefully went against your wishes. After I’ve seen what you can do, I thought we’ve finally found an effective way to counter Wen RuoHan’s Yin Iron. We also had one in our possession. Are you saying you didn’t plan on using it to defeat Wen RuoHan from the start?” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer, which was an answer in itself. “You cannot shoulder this burden alone. Aren’t two forces against Wen RuoHan better than one?”

“I could’ve handled it.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. “You needn’t to do this. It will bring you misery and pain. I wanted to spare you of that.”

“Lan SiZhui, it’s not your job to spare me anything. I’ve made my decision alone and knowing the consequences. There’s no point regretting the past. Let us look for the future instead, okay?” He smiled and raised his cup. Lan SiZhui huffed, annoyed.

“The future is exactly why I’m worried. You say you understand the consequences, but I’ve seen it go down in history.” He leaned forward, desperate to convince Wei WuXian. The other cocked an eyebrow.

“Are you saying I’m like Wen RuoHan?”

“if you are, then so am I.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, denying it. “But intentions aren’t the only thing that can drag a person down. Circumstances, other people’s opinion, even if we don’t do anything, the Sects will always be suspicious of the two of us. They will see now anyone who’s trying to mimic our methods as people we encouraged to do so. There will be bad men amongst them and seeing that, they will blame us. And who knows what we’re willing to do in the name of righteousness?”

“What are we willing to do in the name of righteousness, SiZhui?” Wei WuXian looked at him flatly. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and straightened up. Wei WuXian shook his

head. “Everyone saw what we did during the battle. There’s no point denying it. They saw us, and they will forever judge us by that. We just need to prove them wrong.”

“It might not be this easy.” Lan SiZhui muttered.

“Then even if they turn on us and decide we need to die, we will take the punishment.” Wei WuXian said.

“We’re not the only people this affects.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“Maybe so. Isn’t it their decision to stand with us or apart us? When it comes to it, I won’t have any hatred in my heart.”

“Shouldn’t our goal be for it not to come to it?” Lan SiZhui held his head and Wei WuXian chuckled.

“There are forces in this world we cannot control. Such is people’s hearts. If they decide to hate us now, how could we convince them not to hate us later? Let’s not worry about things we cannot change. Let’s just enjoy life until it lasts.” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer this, didn’t know how to. Wei WuXian refilled his cup and threw it back, turning in his seat so he could lean against the table, his back to Lan SiZhui. He looked up, watching as a few clouds floated on the sky, hiding then revealing the round moon above them.

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The next day Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling found themselves packing up. They didn’t get comfortable here, so they didn’t have a lot of things to pack. After they were done, they met at the courtyard leading to the palace, where already countless people were preparing. Carts had been brought up and an entire army of horses was waiting on the courtyard. People came and went from the reception hall, where people were also having breakfast and drinks while they waited to go, chatting and catching up with friends. The atmosphere was of a conference that just ended and everyone was going home but nobody was rushing.

Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi settled at an empty table in the reception hall. Without having to ask, a whirlwind of servants came put food on their table hastily, then they were gone already, before they could even utter a word.

“You will ask Jiang FengMian and Jin GuangShan to go to Lotus Pier now, won’t you?” Lan JingYi asked Jin Ling in between bites, ignoring the rules in favor of conversation. Him and Jin Ling were still in a fragile state of standstill.

“Yes. I couldn’t ask them last night.” Jin Ling grumbled, sounding annoyed, but for once, not at Lan JingYi.

“Ah, there comes Sect Leader Jiang.” Lan JingYi said some minutes later. Jin Ling looked over where he was pointing and followed Jiang FengMian with his gaze as the Sect Leader headed towards the main table, where Jin GuangShan was eating, Jin GuangYao standing to his side. They were talking, but stopped once Jiang FengMian came closer. He bowed and Jin GuangShan returned it. “Should you go ask now?”

Jin Ling grunted at Lan JingYi's question, not really paying attention to him.

"Do you want me to go with?" Lan JingYi asked, which earned a glare from Jin Ling. Lan JingYi held up his hands. "I'm just asking. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Whatever." Jin Ling grumbled.

"Whatever to my question or to my apology?"

"Shut up." Jin Ling told him. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes, but stayed quiet. They ate in silence for a while, then Jin Ling suddenly jumped up, hurrying off towards the main table, where Jiang FengMian was about to leave.

Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui pulled closer to each other to watch. Jin Ling bowed to Jiang FengMian, then said something, gesturing towards Jin GuangShan, who looked on, interested. Then they stepped closer and Jin Ling said something else. Jin GuangShan looked surprised. Then, there was a pause and Jin GuangShan's smile was tense as he said something. Jin Ling tensed. Jiang FengMian said something to him and the two Lan just caught a glimpse of Jin Ling scoffing at him before the boy turned to Jin GuangShan and said something else.

"I wish we could hear." Lan JingYi whispered.

"Mn." Lan SiZhui agreed and they kept watching.

Jin GuangShan was saying something, gesturing with his hands around them. Jin Ling shook his head. Then, Jin GuangShan turned to Jin GuangYao, who nodded and stepped away, going to where Jin ZiXuan was just entering. He told him something and Jin ZiXuan nodded, turning to his companions, then he left with Jin GuangYao to head back to Jin GuangShan, Jiang FengMian and Jin Ling. There, Jiang FengMian was saying something. When Jin ZiXuan and Jin GuangYao arrived, they stopped talking and turned to them.

Jin ZiXuan bowed to his father, then Jiang FengMian, then finally, he turned to Jin Ling and told him something. From this angle, they could just see Jin Ling's face and saw how it went from annoyed to something slightly softer, talking to his father, then confused, finally, shocked. Like someone slapped him in the face, his eyes widened, he swallowed. Then, Jin GuangShan said something from behind him and Jin Ling schooled his features, frown back in place as he turned to his grandfather, telling him something, then with a hasty bow, he left, hurrying back to the Lan.

Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui tried to look like they weren't looking the whole time, but Jin Ling didn't care about that as he sat heavily back into his place and said:

"I'm not going to Lotus Pier."

"Why?" Lan JingYi asked, curious.

"Because I'm going to monitor Qiongqi Path with my father." He said this, but he didn't sound like he himself believed it.

“How come?” Lan JingYi asked.

“He asked me himself. Said I was a very good archer and since we’ve worked together during the Campaign, we know each other well and work well together. He said if he had to be stuck there for months with someone, he’d rather it be me.”

“*He* said that?” Lan JingYi asked skeptically. “Young Master Jin, who is only slightly more talkative than Lan WangJi and is much ruder?”

“Hey.” Lan SiZhui said pointlessly, since he was waved off anyways.

“You know what I mean.” Lan JingYi said.

“Right into my face.” Jin Ling nodded.

“You’re *sure* you didn’t hear wrong?” Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling finally shook off his mood and glared at his friend.

“He stood a meter away from me. I heard each word clearly.”

“It’s just—wow! And he didn’t sound forced, like someone told him to say this?” Jin Ling tensed, his hand clenching into a fist, his chest expanding. Before he could yell or beat Lan JingYi into a plump, Lan SiZhui jumped in.

“And you want to go?” He asked gently and Jin Ling lost some of the tension, though he still eyed Lan JingYi.

“Yes. I mean, if anyone, it should be one of us who goes, shouldn’t it?”

“I just mean Jin GuangYao knows where you’re from, so isn’t it suspicious?” Lan JingYi continued what he started to say before Lan SiZhui spoke up. Both looked at him and Lan JingYi pulled back. “Don’t look at me like that. I don’t mean that Jin ZiXuan doesn’t want you to go, in fact, I’m sure he does. The year-long defiance you had held towards him must’ve gotten to him.” He added sarcastically, not able to talk to Jin Ling without teasing him. “Think about it. He had been fighting back, only accepting you once Lan XiChen asked him to do so, and now all of a sudden he says you’re close friends? Wasn’t it just a few days ago that he told you his marriage is none of your business? Why the sudden change of heart? Jin GuangYao knows something, we’ve established that. Could it have been him who talked him into this?”

“But what does he gain if I go to Qiongqi Path with Jin ZiXuan?” Jin Ling frowned. “I know he’s smart and he plans ahead, but I don’t see the endgame.”

“Clearly, that’s intentional.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Maybe he realized your connection to Jin ZiXuan and uses it to blindside you. If you’re too busy being happy that your—Jin ZiXuan wants to spend time with you, you don’t have time to investigate him or to plan against him.”

Jin Ling was quiet for a long time after this, staring into his cup of tea. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look. What Lan JingYi said made sense, but at the same time, Lan SiZhui wanted to believe Jin Ling’s father also finally began to see Jin Ling’s good qualities.

“Maybe...” Lan SiZhui started and Jin Ling looked up at him sharply. “Maybe Jin GuangYao really does have plans like this, but at the same time, can he really tell Jin ZiXuan how to feel? Would Jin ZiXuan say he likes you just because Jin GuangYao told him to say so? He has more pride than that, doesn’t he? Maybe it was Jin GuangYao who gave him the idea to take you to Qiongqi Path, but if he was truly against the idea or sensed some ill intent behind it, he wouldn’t have done it. I don’t know Young Master Jin well, but from my experience and from what others told me about him, he was always unlike his father and brother, not engaging in scheming and hidden intent.”

“That’s true.” Lan JingYi nodded, looking to Jin Ling, who watched them wordlessly. Lan SiZhui felt bad. He wouldn’t say Jin Ling was happy just moments ago, but he got something he never had; his father’s appreciation and approval. Then the two Lan ruined it for him.

“Anyways.” Jin Ling turned back to his tea. “I’ve already said I’ll go, so I can’t go back on my word now. It was originally you who would’ve watched Qiongqi Path, now it will be me.” He said, then sipped from the tea, but then he scoffed and put the cup down. “I’ll get a fresh one.” He said, standing and storming out of the room. Lan SiZhui didn’t call after him to tell him the fresh pots were near their table.



The main courtyard, previously the stage for the last battle was full of cultivators getting ready to leave. The army of horses that had been previously there were fewer and many were now mounted by purple-clad disciples. There were several carriages among the riders, bringing goods and injured home. The Sect Leader and his family stood near the front, talking.

Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling watched from the steps in front of the Scorching Sun palace.

“It’s going to be strange. We’ve spent so much time together and we part again.” Lan JingYi sighed.

“You and SiZhui will be together, stop whining.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“We will visit you. Let’s go on a night hunt together. I feel like we haven’t been in ages.”

“How are you planning on visiting me?” Jin Ling scoffed. “Aren’t the Lan going to spend their time healing and rebuilding? Stay where you are and do your duty. If it was up to me, I’d also stay in Lotus Pier to keep an eye on Wei WuXian.”

“Why?” Lan JingYi frowned. “He’s fine.”

“Not because I worry about him.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “I worry about everyone else. If he loses control, I won’t be there to protect my family.”

“He won’t lose control.”

“You don’t know for sure as I don’t know for sure either.” Jin Ling said. “But it’s not like I can do anything about it.”

“Well, at least you’ll look after Jin ZiXuan.” Lan JingYi shrugged. “That’s also a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Of course.” Jin Ling frowned. “Why wouldn’t it be?” At this, Lan JingYi just rolled his eyes, but didn’t say anything. There were some movements below that indicated the Jiang Sect was ready to go and they turned their focus back there.

Jiang FengMian sat atop a horse in the front of the group, and he was talking to someone on the ground. Then they saw Lan XiChen stepping back, out of the way and the Sect Leader glanced back one more time. As their eyes met, he nodded to the three boys standing in front of the Palace, they called out and heeled his horse. Behind him, Jiang Cheng glanced back once, nodded to them, then rode after his father. Next to him, Wei WuXian suddenly turned his horse around, stepping out of the way as the Jiang left through the gates. They ignored him, probably expecting Wei WuXian to come after them if he was done.

“Lan SiZhui!” He called out, waving with his flue. Lan SiZhui smiled at him. “I’ve decided on a name!” Still shouting, he recited:

*“’Jealous of true beauty’s fragrance, Mo Mu preens herself on her comeliness; But if you have Xi Shi’s lovely face, the slanderer will get in and supplant you. I wished to set forth my thoughts and explain my actions: I little dreamed that this would be held a crime. That I was unjustly treated is clear as daylight, plain as the stars above in their constellations.’\*”*

“How arrogant.” Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. Lan SiZhui just shook his head, then called back:

“Chenqing is a fitting name, brother Wei!” At this, Wei WuXian seemed surprised, not understanding how Lan SiZhui knew, but then he grinned and nodded.

“When you have time, come to Lotus Pier! I’ll treat you my favorite wine again!” He said, then turned winking at Lan WangJi, who was standing with his brother before he kicked his horse and rode through the gate in a dead rush. Some disciples who had been going through the gate just then had to stop to placate their spooked horses, and they grumbled, annoyed as they continued ahead.



“Write if anything happens.” Lan JingYi asked Jin Ling as he mounted his horse. Lan SiZhui held the reins to keep the animal steady.

“If anything happens, I won’t have time to write.” Jin Ling said. “Don’t fuss. We’ll see each other way too soon anyways.”

“Don’t say anything to Jin ZiXuan. Even if you get mad.” Lan JingYi said and Jin Ling glared at him. “I’m not saying because I don’t trust you!” Lan JingYi defended. “I just worry if he knows, you won’t exist anymore.”



“Well, don’t worry about me, it’s annoying. If I cease to exist that’s my business. What do you have to do with it?”

“You’re my friend, naturally, I don’t want you to cease to exist.”

“We’re not friends.” Jin Ling said. “You’re just way too clingy.”

“Must you be so difficult?” Lan JingYi clicked his tongue.

“Must, mustn’t, I am, so what?”

“Did you just admit you’re difficult?” Lan JingYi grinned and Jin Ling looked heavenward.

“I’m done with this conversation. I’m going back, they’re serving tea. Goodbye.” He turned and with his hands behind his back began a dignified trot towards the Scorching Sun Palace, where the Jin Sect was having one last meal before they, too, headed out.

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi called out. “Hey! Don’t just walk away!” Jin Ling raised a hand and waved.

“We’ll visit you later in the summer!” Lan SiZhui called out after him. Jin Ling just bowed his head, ignoring them as he disappeared in the crowd. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look. Not a minute later Jin Ling appeared on the steps, then halfway up he stopped and turned around, watching them. Lan JingYi grinned and stood in his saddle to wave.

“Boys, if you’re ready.” Lan XiChen said, looking back from his horse. Next to him, Nie MingJue sat with a grim expression; he mustn’t be pleased that the Nie Sect had to travel to Cloud Recesses in large numbers as well, to cure the Yin Iron’s influence.

Lan SiZhui nodded and pulled Lan JingYi back into his saddle. Lan XiChen nodded, then he, too, looked up at Jin Ling, nodding to him, then turned and urged his horse to move. As they rode out, Lan JingYi quickly relaxed into the ride. Lan SiZhui looked back once more before the gates blocked his view and saw Jin Ling still watching them before the stone gates obscured his vision.

## Chapter End Notes

\*From The Songs of the South: Nine Pieces: VII ‘Alas for the Days Gone By’ by Qu Yuan, translated by David Hawkes.

## Perception I.

Despite being away from home for such a long time, not much had changed in Cloud Recesses. They have arrived mid-afternoon and the guards at the gates had already got word of their arrival, so even the Nie Sect's members, who had come with them, were led through the gates without issue.

Once they've entered the walls surrounding the home of the Lan Sect, everyone had been instructed to stay right there. Healers were waiting for them and took away those injured who couldn't move or had a hard time moving while the tail end of the returning crowd had arrived. Lan XiChen stood near Nie MingJue but he was otherwise occupied, greeting an elder who had been waiting for him, listening as the elder updated him about the state of the Sect.

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi settled not far from them, their bags on the ground, Lan JingYi sitting on top of the bundle holding their tent. As they stood around, he kept yawning widely, and Lan SiZhui felt for him. They left the horses they took with them in Gusu, three Lan and two Su disciples taking care of them until they decided what to do with them. Su She, who had become the Clan Leader after his brother's death didn't come with, but took most Su disciples and returned home. When they saw this, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look, but there was not much they could do about the situation regarding the Su Clan. All they could do was to look out for Su She in the future.

Lan SiZhui still wasn't convinced of Jin Ling's theory about Su She making a deal with the Wen and drawing the map. Even though this lined up with everything they knew, according to history such thing never occurred, or it had been so insignificant, nobody cared enough to reveal it. Su She was a coward and he betrayed them all, but this never came out before Wei WuXian revealed he had been the shadow man who had attacked him and Lan WangJi on multiple accounts in the future.

How much easier would their job be if they had access to history books and accounts from their future! Or even if they had one or more seniors by their sides. He wistfully looked towards northwest where Lotus Pier laid a day long journey away from them. He had been surprised to say the least, that Jin Ling didn't push to go to Lotus Pier. The other boy clearly wanted to spend time with his maternal family, even if he disliked Jiang FengMian and him and Madam Yu were on the terms they were on, it was clear as day for Lan SiZhui that even this made Jin Ling happy. He never knew his parents and Jiang WanYin hardly talked about them, but he grew up partially in the Lotus Pier, so he must've heard much about the former Jiang family.

Jin Ling also missed his uncle. It was not obvious and if anyone suggested this, he would most likely decapitate them on the spot, but Lan SiZhui had seen him after Guanyin temple, saw that he had cried and how ever since then he spent as much time away from Koi Tower as he could get away with. Lan SiZhui couldn't even imagine how must it be like for him right now. He had lost his uncle, the person who raised him and in the future it was even painful for him to be in the very place said uncle raised him, memories probably too strong to

ignore. Since Jin GuangYao had been pronounced a villain, people frowned upon Jin Ling when he cried and they shamed him for missing someone who had tried to kill him. Jin Ling might shout from the rooftops that he didn't trust Jin GuangYao, and that he wanted to have nothing to do with him, but in reality, he was still a sixteen years old boy who had lost one of his only parental figures.

Lan SiZhui suspected this was the bigger reason why Jin Ling wanted to stay away from Koi Tower to begin with. He seemed completely fine when he went there during the time Lan SiZhui was at the indoctrination, but since Jin GuangYao had appeared again, he had been vocal in not wanting to go back to his home. That Jin ZiXuan managed to convince him to help the Jin at all sort of astonished Lan SiZhui.

Jin Ling, when he told them this, said that he wanted to go because someone needed to keep an eye on Qiongqi Path, but Lan SiZhui wondered what was the real reason. Sure, his father had asked him for the first time ever, to spend time with him, but Jin Ling wasn't sentimental like that. If he truly didn't want to go and really wanted to go to Lotus Pier, he would've rejected it and knowing him, would've acted like he was doing them a favor by doing so.

So, why, did Jin Ling agree to go with his father, Lan SiZhui didn't know. It couldn't be to monitor Qiongqi. Jin Ling didn't care about the Wen, and other than his father's presence, Lan SiZhui couldn't even begin to guess his motivation. Jin Ling, for all Lan JingYi mocked and how he disliked his own title, was quite smart and everything he did had a reason. It might be a dumb reason, even by Lan SiZhui's own opinion, but it was still some reason. Lan SiZhui guessed this was where Jin Ling's heritage shone through, except where his parental family used this skill to scheme and plot, Jin Ling used it for strategy and helping people.

It was hard to admit, but Lan JingYi had been right all those months ago. Jin Ling's skills had gotten better since they've been spending time with each other, though Lan SiZhui hardly believed the credit was theirs. Jin Ling always had this in him, but so far he had been coddled and spoiled in Koi Tower, so he needn't to make an effort. In a place where nobody even thought twice about him, much less knew who he was, where none of his elders were present to protect him, Jin Ling had no other choice but to use the skills he always had in him and this resulted in him becoming better and better.

Lan SiZhui was proud of his friend and happy for him, but at the same time, he wished Jin Ling wouldn't use these skills against them. He was keeping secrets, that much had become obvious when him and Lan JingYi got into that argument that ended with Jin Ling storming out and refusing to talk to Lan JingYi until the other annoyed him into speaking. But now, that Lan SiZhui knew Jin Ling kept secrets, he began to wonder how much and what he didn't tell them. This wasn't a pleasant line of thought, but a necessary one.

Jin Ling was the only one present when the main event went down in Guanyin temple, even though Lan SiZhui arrived later, Jin Ling heard most of Jin GuangYao's story. Some of it had been shared publicly, some of it he himself told them, but based on the amount time they spent in that temple, Lan SiZhui wondered what other secrets had been revealed that they didn't know about.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Jin Ling, and that he didn't trust he would tell them important things, but he had to wonder. Did Jin Ling say Su She worked for the Wen because he knew

for sure or was this just a hunch? Was he so afraid of Wen ZhuLiu's powers because the book had been revealed in the future as well and someone knew how to melt Cores? Had anyone's Core been melted from the people they knew? Why did Jin Ling dislike his grandfather, both of them? Lan SiZhui always just assumed it was because of his personality, that Jiang FengMian was weak in his eyes, and Jin GuangShan led the kind of life he led, but was there more to it?

"You have that face." Lan JingYi said next to him and Lan SiZhui looked over, blinking.

"Huh?"

"Boys." Lan JingYi couldn't answer, because Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue walked up to them. Lan JingYi scrambled on his feet, hastily bowing to the Sect Leaders. "We will all be busy in the next few days, but I know you two have plans once you recover. I won't be able to monitor you while I take care of the Sect, so I leave it up to you to look for me once you're ready to proceed. I want to know your process." Lan XiChen said and Nie MingJue nodded. Lan SiZhui nodded.

"Of course, ZeWu-Jun."

"Good." Lan XiChen nodded, though he was already drifting off, a faraway look entering his eyes. "Grandmaster is hurt, so he wasn't able to look after the Sect while I was gone. There's a lot to do. Regardless, even if I seem too busy, come for me, I'll make time for you. MingJue needs to enter seclusion to help his healing and the reconstruction is slow going because most of our disciples had been at war. You might need to help out. WangJi is busy caring for our uncle..." He trailed off, exhaling deeply.

"How is Grandmaster?" Lan SiZhui asked once it became clear Lan XiChen continued his monologue internally. The Sect Leader's eyes focused back on him and he smiled sadly.

"He is in a coma. He stood in Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu's way when they tried to escape. The disciples who had been with him say Wen ZhuLiu struck him, but his Core is intact, so the healers aren't sure what's wrong exactly. They suspect it has something to do with Wen ZhuLiu's hit and the wards being broken at the same time, when the two escaped."

"Will he recover?" Lan SiZhui asked, worried.

He knew practically none of his friends liked Lan QiRen. In that regard Lan JingYi might be the best, because he actually didn't mind the Grandmaster that much, he just always felt like he wasn't up to standard in the man's eye. This is why when they showed Lan QiRen their Graveyard-Purging talisman Lan JingYi was so enthusiastic. Lan SiZhui suspected that in secret Lan JingYi wished to impress Lan QiRen.

Lan SiZhui on the other hand knew the Grandmaster completely differently than any of his friends. While it was mainly Lan XiChen then later Lan WangJi who taught him and raised him, Lan QiRen was always there, someone he could always rely on. He didn't have as close of a relationship with him as he had with the Two Jades, but Lan XiChen often went to him for advice regarding Lan SiZhui and so his nurture was indirectly partially result of Lan

QiRen's efforts. Lan SiZhui himself spent a respectable amount of time with his grand uncle outside classes, so he also knew the man's personality a bit better than even Lan JingYi.

"The healers are optimistic, but it's hard to say just yet." Lan XiChen shook his head to show he wasn't sure. "All we can do is to hope."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui bowed his head to hide his expression.

"Thank you, ZeWu-Jun." Lan JingYi said. "For looking out for us I mean."

"Naturally." Lan XiChen nodded with a more cheerful smile. "I'll get going now. Rest, then heal up as well."

"Thank you, ZeWu-Jun." The two of them bowed and Lan XiChen glanced at Nie MingJue before walking off, the Nie Sect Leader on one side, the elder he'd been talking to on the other. Soon, the rest of them were also released, but not before a healer checked all of them for hidden injuries. He informed Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui that those who had been influenced by the Yin Iron will go to the Cold Springs to recover and they will need to drink healing teas for at least a month. With this, they were dismissed and the group of a hundred cultivators gathered at the gates left to settle in their respective rooms.

Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi also separated, promising to meet for dinner. Lan SiZhui entered his rooms, expecting to find them stale and stuffy after having left for so long, but since the disciples were informed of their return, the rooms had been aired out and put in order. He disposed his swords in their stand then pulled out Hudie.

The guqin didn't seem any different, despite their discovery of the Stygian Tiger Amulet clinging to it. Lan SiZhui stared at his guqin for a long time, then sighed and put it on the guqin stand as well. He unpacked the rest of his things, then looked around the room. He didn't feel like meditating but also didn't want to do anything else, and dinner with Lan JingYi was still a few hours later, so deciding to make use of his privacy, he laid on his bed, fully clothed and just stared at the ceiling.

Despite being in the past and his family not knowing who he was, this still felt like home. It comforted him and for a little while he let go of his worries. This was nice, floating mindlessly and he wondered if he didn't have the sickness when on water, how would it feel to float on the lakes of Lotus Pier.

A knock shook Lan SiZhui out of his dozing and startled, he realized he fell asleep. He got up, adjusted his clothing and went to open the door, revealing Lan JingYi peering at him curiously.

"Did I wake you?" He asked, sounding amused and Lan SiZhui frowned, confused. Lan JingYi pointed at his own forehead. "Your ribbon is crooked." Lan SiZhui felt his face blush as he adjusted the ribbon as well. "Are you ready?" Lan SiZhui nodded and the two of them headed off.

Lan SiZhui stepped into the dining hall, expecting a quiet and organized meal after the chaos of the camps in the past few months, but instead, the Lan disciples were relaxed, talking here

and there. Those who had been at war were telling those who hadn't about it, and those who hadn't been told them about their own events. It was much more lively than Lan SiZhui was used to or expected.

"How about we eat in your rooms?" Lan JingYi asked next to him and Lan SiZhui glanced at him surprised, then nodded with a grateful smile.

The gentle positive energy of the mountains already made Lan SiZhui less tense and now, in the quiet peace of his own rooms, he finally felt calm. As they finished a silent meal, he served Gusu's *Gentle Rest* tea. It was one that was made from the plants at the side of two of the outer mountains and because of it, the herbs included were infused with positive energy. This was Gusu's only medicinal tea that didn't actually taste like medicine, and because of this, many people enjoyed it even when they weren't injured.

"I worry." Lan JingYi said after a while. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"Why?"

"Many things still haven't happened and... I'm just so tired, SiZhui." He sighed. "I worry about Jin Ling, because he will be with the Jin and the Wen. I worry about you, because we don't know what Wen ZhuLiu did to you is permanent or not. The healers said they couldn't tell! Who says that?!" He held his head. "I worry about Jin GuangYao and I worry about Jin GuangShan. I worry about Wei WuXian and Jiang WanYin. I worry about Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun. I worry about myself, too, SiZhui. What if the Yin Iron did something to me and I'll die of qi deviation like Nie MingJue had?!" By the end, his voice was thin and a little panicked, so Lan SiZhui hurried over to put a hand on his shoulder.

Lan JingYi and Jin Ling both had been very strong while Lan SiZhui was a wreck after the battle. Now that it was Lan JingYi who had trouble with his emotions, he felt like he ought to be just as supportive, but he didn't know how. Out of the two of them, it was always Lan JingYi who knew what to do, what to say. He hugged Lan JingYi's shoulders and the other turned into his embrace, his breath hitching. Lan SiZhui quickly cast a silencing charm at his rooms and shifted to be more comfortable, letting Lan JingYi cry on his shoulder. He still didn't know what to say, but it seemed he didn't need to say anything.

They stayed like that past the last gong, but Lan SiZhui refused to let Lan JingYi go back to his own rooms. They've been sharing a tent for the past several months, and Lan SiZhui had a spare bedding in one of his cupboards. After a while, Lan SiZhui picked up Lan JingYi's wrist and checked his pulse. Lan JingYi wasn't asleep, though he wasn't completely awake either. It didn't matter.

"Let's go to the Cold Pond Cave first thing tomorrow morning." Lan SiZhui suggested quietly and Lan JingYi nodded against his shoulder.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

They spent about two weeks in seclusion in the Cold Pond Cave. For once, even Lan JingYi didn't complain, which was a clear indicator that the other night he wasn't just dramatic, but

truly worried about his own health. Lan SiZhui was relieved that after just a few days he could no longer sense any resentful energy inside his friend.

As for himself, the situation was different. While Wen ZhuLiu didn't damage his Core too badly this time, he did quite a number on his meridians. Thanks to Jin Ling's arrow he couldn't finish the job, but he did enough damage that even after two weeks, Lan SiZhui felt that his spiritual powers circulated sluggishly in his meridians. Because of this, resentful energy also couldn't leave his body well. Wen ZhuLiu was truly the master of his art, for even though he couldn't destroy Lan SiZhui's Core, he still found a way to injure him badly.

Unfortunately, Cloud Recesses' doctors didn't know how to fix this fast. They predicted it would take him at least a year to fully recover. Until then, they cautioned him against overusing his spiritual powers, for he might end up hurting himself more. If he used them, it might be painful and he would definitely tire more easily and need more time to recover from any injury he sustains in the meantime. This was fine, for Lan SiZhui didn't plan on fighting anyone anytime soon. In fact, he was secretly glad for this little excuse not to fight anyone.

Right now, they were just after the war and everyone was tired. After such a long period of solving mysteries, reliving the past and trying to alter the events, they needed this little break. At least Lan SiZhui did. Lan JingYi also seemed content with returning to the Cloud Recesses as per usual and spend some time there attending his usual duties.

Of course, this wasn't the same as in the future. Many things were different, not only people. Now instead of going to their lessons every day, they had to help out with the reconstruction, mainly with the texts that needed to be repaired, since Lan SiZhui was still injured and Lan JingYi didn't seem to wish to leave his side. This went on for a few weeks, then eventually everything returned to normal.



Life in Cloud Recesses was structured and tranquil. It gave Lan SiZhui comfort, for this was what he grew up with. He knew how to talk to people here, there was no need to be careful with his words. He was also talked to the same way the Lan disciples talked to anyone else and after the strange times in Nightless City, this especially comforted Lan SiZhui.

Nie MingJue had entered seclusion right after they've arrived, so did most Nie disciples and because of that, they didn't see much of the other Sect's members. If they didn't know they were healing somewhere, Lan SiZhui could easily believe they weren't even in Cloud Recesses.

Although they had plans to leave once they were healed, Lan JingYi seemed to forget them and simply enjoyed returning to normalcy again. Lan SiZhui did as well, though he had worries he couldn't ignore. The first and foremost was the fate of the DafanWen.

While Lan SiZhui at first let Wen Qing and Wen Ning to go back to Dafan, reassured there they would be safe, Jin Ling shone light onto an issue Lan SiZhui had overlooked before: the Wen had been on Dafan in the past as well, only to somehow end up on Qionggqi. Even though they managed to convince Jin GuangShan to only take Wen cultivators and not civilians, this was no guarantee that the Jin soldiers would follow this order. This was part of

the reason why Jin Ling went to Qiongqi and why Lan XiChen insisted someone to go from each Sect to monitor the situation there. Lan SiZhui wasn't sure who was sent there from his own Sect and others.

Anyhow, he couldn't leave this up to fate. He needed to go to Dafan anyways, to give Feixu back, so since he was already there, what could it hurt to stay until the Crowd Hunt? Lan JingYi would protest, of course, but Lan SiZhui needed his friend to stay in Cloud Recesses and keep his eye on things here. It wasn't that he didn't want Lan JingYi to come with him, but he simply thought it would be wiser to spread out and divide their powers. If Lan SiZhui wouldn't be able to make it to the Crowd Hunt for some reason, Lan JingYi would still go. If something went wrong, Jin Ling would have help.

Leaving Lan JingYi out of his plans was not his favorite choice, but he also thought the other boy didn't need this trouble right now. He still needed to talk to him, tell him, but first, he promised to talk to Lan XiChen about their plans.

One night before curfew but after dinner, about four weeks into returning home, Lan SiZhui set out and walked through the Cloud Recesses. He loved the Lan Sect's home best at night, when everything was quiet and beautiful. It was summer, which meant crickets were chirping, joining the cicadas in their loud song.

Lan SiZhui stopped before the Hanshi, took a deep breath and knocked. Lan XiChen seemed ready for bed as he opened the door, hair down and a soft, light blue robe that was not his usual attire hanging loosely from his shoulders above white underrobes. Once he saw Lan SiZhui, he seemed a little surprised, but still smiled at him.

"Good evening, SiZhui."

"Good evening, ZeWu-Jun." Lan SiZhui bowed. "Do you have a minute?"

"Of course." Lan XiChen nodded, despite the surely tiring day he had. He stepped aside, indicating Lan SiZhui to enter and as he did, he noticed some tea on the table. "Sit, have some tea." Lan XiChen told him as he also settled behind the table, picking up a new cup and pouring tea for Lan SiZhui. This was a Gusu blend, but Lan SiZhui didn't quite remember which one. He still enjoyed the tea and thanked Lan XiChen for it.

"ZeWu-Jun, I came to share my plans." Lan SiZhui began and Lan XiChen's brows furrowed.

"I thought you and JingYi would come together."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded. "That was the plan originally."

"Then what changed?" Lan XiChen asked, not unkindly.

"ZeWu-Jun, you know I'm planning on going to Dafan."

"To give back the sword." Lan XiChen nodded. "I recall."



“Well... I was thinking.” Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and sighed heavily. “ZeWu-Jun, the truth is, my family is at Dafan Mountain, and I intend on protecting them from the Jin.” Lan XiChen looked ready to answer, but Lan SiZhui kept talking. “While you’ve protected me during the Sunshot Campaign and afterwards as well, I’m not unaware of the issues this brings the Sect. Even though Jin Ling and Lan JingYi are more aware of the political side of things, I also know that siding with me publicly is not a good move for the Lan Sect. Not only that, but the elders also won’t stand for this. How can I keep a good conscience while I know this could tear the Sect apart internally?”

Lan SiZhui never wanted to turn Lan XiChen against the Lan Sect, but if it came down to it, he knew Lan XiChen would. And he also knew the elders would never stand for a demonic cultivator in the Sect, nor a Wen who was intending on fighting the Jin if it came to it, so Lan SiZhui was just waiting the day they would come for him, frankly. Lan XiChen was part of the main family, the Heir and Sect Leader, and animosity between him and the rest of the Sect could only end in complete disaster. He never wanted to get between the Sect and Lan XiChen, nor did he ever want him to make a decision like this. He didn’t want to part ways as Wei WuXian had with Jiang Cheng.

In the past, while Jiang Cheng could’ve fought and could’ve gone against the three Sects, refusing to let Wei WuXian go, the reality was he was a young, newly seated Sect Leader. In that position he couldn’t really have done much. He would have ended up turning at least the Jin Sect against the Jiang. Being the only Sect with the fewest possible losses in the war, the Jin Sect was, at the time the most powerful and so they called the shots. If the Jin Sect publicly went against the Jiang Sect, the Lan and Nie Sects would’ve been expected to join them as to not face annihilation. In that situation, the Jiang Sect, weak, beaten and with few numbers would’ve faced a new war, this time against them, and they would’ve been wiped out. This was not speculation but factual. Obviously, Jiang Cheng didn’t want that.

The other factor playing into Wei WuXian parting from the Jiang Sect was the more personal one; even if he loved Wei WuXian dearly, Jiang Cheng was still a cultivator and as such, he was taught not to trust unorthodox methods. He might’ve overlooked them in the heat of war, even looked favorably upon them, but once emotions settled, Jiang Cheng was just as prejudiced against these methods as anyone else. There was no shame in this, for most, if not all cultivators thought that way. He might’ve even asked Wei WuXian to give up his demonic cultivation – Lan SiZhui knew little about the inner matters of the Jiang Sect – but seeing he had people to protect, Wei WuXian would’ve refused. Wei WuXian wasn’t the kind of person to let people unjustly suffer.

As to people unjustly suffering, Lan SiZhui had no illusions that anyone would’ve excused the Wen. Jiang Cheng had more reason to hate them than anyone else, and even if they helped them during the war, it wouldn’t have meant anything. The Wen Sect had maimed the Jiang Sect and the Jiang family as well, Jiang Cheng’s mother and father. Helping them during the war, sheltering them and looking after them, while a kind act, meant nothing in the face of all the cruelty the Jiang Sect had suffered. There was also no shame in seeing things this way, Lan SiZhui thought. If a dog bites you once, you’re afraid of all dogs for the rest of your life, after all, no matter if they previously licked your fingers only. When trust is broken, the mistreated party will find it hard to trust again.

Now, Lan XiChen was the young Sect Leader of the Lan Sect, but Lan SiZhui didn't want to repeat past mistakes. Wei WuXian at the time lived in uncertainty and his parting from the Jiang Sect was sudden though not entirely unexpected, it was still something that shouldn't have happened the way it did. It wasn't too late yet, but it left a rift between the brothers Lan SiZhui wouldn't be able to deal with, would it happen to him and his Sect.

He wanted to do this the right and clean way as much as possible, and knowing it was unavoidable, helped this more. Wei WuXian couldn't keep his place at the time, nor could Lan SiZhui, but he didn't want this decision to be in anyone else's hand but his and his Sect Leader's. Thankfully, Lan XiChen was also aware of these extreme circumstances and in a way Lan SiZhui's position in the Sect was not of importance for him, for once he returned to the future, none of this would be relevant anymore – or so he hoped. Anyhow, Lan SiZhui didn't belong here in the first place.

While he was in the Burial Mounds, Lan SiZhui had taken off his forehead ribbon. Initially because he was sick and uncomfortable and hurt, but as time passed, he thought less and less of the Lan teachings as desperation took tighter hold of his heart. As he turned to more and more wicked tricks in order to get out, he felt less and less deserving of the Lan Sect's kindness all those years ago for taking him in. He was grateful, but it wasn't like this moment would never had come. Even in the future, as Jin Ling said, people found out about his heritage and sooner or later Lan SiZhui needed to face the world as a Wen.

In the future he had precious little family left. Now he got a second chance to save them. He loved Hanguang-Jun. He was his father, brother, mentor, his family, blood or not. He was grateful to have Senior Wei, Xian-ge back. He even had Wen Ning in the future. He got so much love from them and he was so grateful, but they also all taught him to stay true to himself, to always act righteously and to be kind. If Lan SiZhui didn't save his family, wouldn't he go against all those teachings his family in the future gave him? Would he not betray their trust?

He might be over his head. But he'd come a long way from the stumbling junior disciple who was responsible for the deaths in Mo Manor; all three of them were far from their old selves. They grew up here in this strange new place, willingly or not. And Lan SiZhui, just like Lan XiChen, just like Jin Ling, had become more confident in the decisions he made. And he knew what to do in order to accomplish all he needed. He would protect his family. He wouldn't stand between Lan XiChen and the Lan Sect. He would keep Lan JingYi safe. He would – if he could – save Wei WuXian.

But for that, he had to do what he'd been dreading since Jin Ling brought up that people knew of his birth family.

“Sect Leader Lan, may I speak bluntly?” He asked after a short pause and Lan XiChen watched him searchingly.

“I think I know where you're going with this.” He said quietly and Lan SiZhui smiled at him sadly.

“It's not that I don't want to belong to the Lan Sect. They saved me and cared for me for so long, they are my family. I will forever be grateful for all they've done for me and I'll never

be able to repay this debt. But right now, my responsibilities lay elsewhere and my place in the Sect is inconvenient for not just me but for you as well. Sect Leader Lan, think about Sect Leader Jiang's words. The decisions you make affect the people you care for as well. Can you say with full confidence if my actions bring danger to the Sect, you won't regret standing with me?"

"Things have changed." Lan XiChen shook his head. "How could I abandon you now?" He looked troubled.

"It's the exact opposite." Lan SiZhui said. "If I stay and the Sects turn against the Lan, or the elders decide to punish me for my crimes, it would be me who suffers from the knowledge you were going to go against them for my sake. The Lan had done so much for me already, I cannot ask them to do this as well."

"You're not asking." Lan XiChen shook his head. "This is our duty as your Sect."

"But you don't owe me that." Lan SiZhui argued. "I'm a Wen. All my life I was complacent with having the Lan surname, for I was not aware of my heritage and nobody in my family survived, but now they could and my duty is to them as my blood family."

"But if you go away, we won't be able to protect nor you, nor your family. You told us children and old will be imprisoned and the Lan Sect is supposed to stand against this exact thing. Let us do our duty as the Lan Sect and don't go off because you're afraid."

"Sect Leader Lan, you might have this view, but what about the rest of the Sect? What about the elders and those who had been hurt by the Wen? Would they also want to protect them?"

"This is not the first time the Lan had to do something they disliked and in this, WangJi's perspective is the correct one: *overlook past hurts in order to help everyone fairly.*"

"But the human heart is not this simple, is it?" Lan SiZhui smiled sadly. "People will resent you for this decision and who knows what future issues this will bring you. I cannot risk this. I need the Lan Sect to stay the same, for the future not to change."

"Is the future worth your life?" Lan XiChen frowned.

Lan SiZhui sighed. "ZeWu-Jun, I'm not even supposed to be here in the first place. I'm already an issue, but with my demonic cultivation, I bring something into the Sect that was never supposed to exist in it." He paused. "Yes. The future is worth my life because my life as of right now right here, is not supposed to exist. I'll be alive in the future, but I don't belong here, in this lifetime. If I die, what difference does it make?"

"But..." Lan XiChen blinked and for the first time he looked just as lost and clueless as everyone else would be in his situation. Lan SiZhui had never seen him like this. Eventually, the Sect Leader swallowed and looked up at Lan SiZhui sadly. "You've already made your decision, haven't you?"

“I—” Lan SiZhui hesitated. “I wasn’t sure until I began to talk. But yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “The more I think about this the less I see another way. This makes the most sense, even if I don’t like it.”

“And what does JingYi think about this?” Lan SiZhui was quiet, looking down into his cup. Lan XiChen sighed. “If you’re serious about this, you have to tell him. After all, this decision also affects him.”

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, I don’t want him to come with me. Can you force him to stay?” Lan SiZhui looked up, eyes wide. Lan XiChen frowned.

“I cannot force him if he wishes to go. That is not how I run the Sect.” Seeing Lan SiZhui’s face he softened his tone. “Talk to him, I’m sure he will understand.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I don’t like this. What if the Jin really go to take the Wen to Qiongqi Path?” He asked after a beat.

“That’s why I need to be there.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “That’s why I can’t stay in the Sect. If I have to fight them, the Jin will see this as the action of the Lan Sect. I cannot let that happen.”

“You thought this through.” Lan XiChen noted, narrowing his eyes. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“As I said, I wasn’t sure. But Jin Ling is right. In the past, I was with the Wen until they were taken to Qiongqi Path and I lived in Dafan Mountain. This means at one point the Jin will go to take those who live there to Qiongqi. Right now I need to take care of that.” Lan SiZhui paused, then sighed. “When we arrived in the past, I didn’t want to act because I was afraid to make changes to such an important thing as history. I judged Jin Ling for wanting to save his family, but in reality, I’m just the same.”

“They are people you care about. Naturally, you want to save them.”

“It’s not even saving them.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “They would survive... up to a certain point. I just don’t want them to suffer unjustly.”

“Lan SiZhui, you never tell me who brought you into the Lan Sect, but whoever it was, they have taught you well. Even though they would not die, your family would still suffer unjustly and you stand against that. It is exactly what the Lan Sect is supposed to stand for.” Lan XiChen smiled sadly. “But as you said, people’s hearts are not so simple. Even the Lan hold grudges.” He paused and watched Lan SiZhui for a while. “This is an important decision SiZhui, and one you really need to think through.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I’m not making this decision rashly, ZeWu-Jun. The truth is, in the future, before we arrived I just realized I was a Wen. Me and Wen Ning – my cousin – went to pay our respects to the Sect on Mount Dafan and in Nightless City. People saw and recognized me and the rumor that I’m a Wen orphan got out. Jin Ling revealed, just as we arrived, that the rumors already reached the Lotus Pier. When he told me that, ever since then

I've known that I might need to leave the Sect sooner or later. This was a year ago, and in the year I dug this hole I fell into even deeper. The reality is that my parting from the Lan Sect is not a matter of 'if' but 'when'. I'd rather have this parting on my own terms, without any animosity between us, than you being pressured or even overruled by the elders."

"You think that would happen?" Lan XiChen asked, sounding a little amused. Lan SiZhui huffed.

"If I try to imagine what would happen if I stayed and you kept protecting me, it always comes down to two possibilities. Firstly, towards the other Sects you would seem foolish and they would no longer take you seriously. Internally, the elders would question your capabilities and push you to the side, taking back the leadership of the Sect and overrule you. The other possibility is that externally, the Sects would turn against you, think of you as a rebel, a power-hungry villain who uses me to keep them in fear. Internally, the elders would question you and try ruling over you but you wouldn't let them but fight them, maybe getting even physical. In the second scenario you're either defeated and punished severely, or end up winning, but at the cost of the Sect – they wouldn't trust you to make good choices for them anymore."

"You really ought to write a book one of these days." Lan XiChen chuckled, though it didn't sound amused at all. "You have quite the imagination."

"I apologize if I offended you, ZeWu-Jun. But... don't you agree?"

"I agree." Lan XiChen nodded. "Though despite what you think, I wouldn't mind either scenario."

"But I would." Lan SiZhui shook his head. Lan XiChen watched him sadly for a while, then he sighed.

"Talk to JingYi. Once he knows about this and agrees, we will talk more."

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, then nodded.

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Three days later Lan SiZhui still hadn't talked to Lan JingYi. It wasn't that they haven't met – in fact, they spent almost every meal together and saw each other plenty during the day. Except Lan SiZhui was nervous to bring it up.

He knew Lan JingYi, they have lived together for a very long time now, it almost felt like they knew each other all their lives. Lan SiZhui knew that Lan JingYi would not want to let him go alone. Lan JingYi didn't as much liked being in the middle of things as he didn't like leaving his best friend to deal with things alone. When Lan SiZhui decided to go with Wen Ning after Guanyin temple, Lan JingYi offered to go with them right away, and without waiting for a response he started planning the trip. Only when Lan SiZhui pulled him away and said he needed to do this alone for his family, did Lan JingYi stop and even then, he just nodded and said:

*"I need to do this on my own."* Lan SiZhui told him.

*"Of course, it's for you and your family, I know that."* Lan JingYi seemed slightly offended. Lan SiZhui didn't think he knew that. *"So, we'll go to—"*

*"No, I mean I want to go alone. Without you."* Though cutting him off was rude, Lan SiZhui had no choice.

*"Without me?"* Lan JingYi's eyes had been huge and confused. Lan SiZhui nodded. *"But then where will I go while you're gone?"*

*"Go back to Cloud Recesses."*

*"But... When will you be back?"*

*"Just a few weeks, I'll be back before you know it. In the meantime, someone will need to take my place and practice with the juniors. Would you mind taking over for me?"*

*"Ah..."* Lan JingYi seemed conflicted, then sighed. *"Fine. But write. And come back in a month. You know I'm not good at teaching."*

*"Mn."* Lan SiZhui smiled and they hugged before parting ways. That had been then and Lan SiZhui knew Lan JingYi would be worse this time around, since Lan SiZhui... won't come back.

On the fourth day of postponing this talk, Lan SiZhui finally braced himself, steeled his heart and as they finished eating lunch, he put down his chopsticks and folded his hands in his lap. Lan JingYi looked at him questioningly, because usually Lan SiZhui would pour them tea and have casual conversation.

"What?" Lan JingYi asked as he reached for the tea pot. "You want me to pour? I don't even know what kind of tea is this." He said, then took off the lid of the pot and sniffed at the steam. He shrugged, put the lid back and poured them. Lan SiZhui watched, waiting, silently. "SiZhui, you're acting weird." Lan JingYi said when Lan SiZhui didn't pick up his cup.

"We need to talk." Lan SiZhui said, though he didn't look at Lan JingYi but at the tea instead. Lan JingYi slowly put his own cup down, his movements careful, as if he was afraid of spooking Lan SiZhui.

"I'm listening..." He said, drawling.

"I'm leaving." Lan JingYi paused, then huffed, sounding annoyed.

"You made it sound like you were going to tell me you're leaving the entire Sect." He said, amused, picking up his cup, his careful movements gone as he sipped into it. Lan SiZhui cringed. "Don't be ridiculous, I know. You're going to Mount Dafan to give Feixu back. When will you be back? Ah, how about this, don't even come back, write me when you're done and go to Qiongqi, then I'll go as well and we will meet there, let's visit Jin Ling then."

“No.” Lan SiZhui sighed, taking another deep breath. “I am... Leaving the Sect.” Lan JingYi paused again.

“To go to Mount Dafan and then come back...” He said, but Lan SiZhui shook his head. Lan JingYi’s cup landed harshly on the table, tea spilling to the side. “Then come back, SiZhui.”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head again, looking up at Lan JingYi. “JingYi, I’m already in a risky position. The elders have not yet made a move, but I suspect they aren’t done reviewing the reports on the war yet and that’s why. If they learn I’ve used, not only resentful energy but that I controlled it by using one of the forbidden scores, what their reaction will be?” He pressed his lips together. “Not only that, but eventually, as in the past, Jin GuangShan is going to demand the last of the Yin Iron to be turned in. Part of it is with me, but I cannot let it get into the Jin’s hands, so I’ll have to refuse. With that, I’ll draw the anger of the Sects, but especially the Jin’s onto the Lan Sect. We’ve survived a direct attack and a war, but will we survive another one?”

“And that’s not all. You remember what Jin Ling said? I didn’t think of it before, but my family and I were on Dafan Mountain before the Jin took us to Qiongqi. Jin Ling is there and the other Sects’ representatives are also there, but how closely can they monitor that many prisoners? Will they be able to spot us among them? It is better if I go and stay with the Wen until the danger is over. If the Jin come for them, I’ll be able to protect the Wen more than they could protect themselves. If it comes to this, the Jin Sect will surely turn on the Lan and the Lan elders won’t stand for it either. At least we could expect an internal fight, which will weaken us further. I cannot let that happen, not because of me.”

“Okay, and what if it never happens?” Lan JingYi asked, a little angry. “What if the Jin never go to get the Wen, what if you’re parting ways for nothing?”

“I’m prepared for this possibility. It’s fine.”

“How could it be fine?!” Lan JingYi exclaimed. “You cannot even fight! And... And... I don’t even know where to start, there’s so many things wrong with this plan! The Lan is your family, Cloud Recesses is your home, you can’t just say it’s fine if you can never return!”

“I don’t think ZeWu-Jun would exile me entirely. But it’s better if I part ways and not associate so closely with the Lan Sect anymore. Besides, how much longer, do you think, until the Lan decide they don’t like a Wen in their ranks?”

“You’re basing this decision on theories. I reject it.” Lan JingYi glared. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“And here I was afraid you’d want to come with me.” He chuckled, amused.

“There’s no point, because you’re not going anywhere. I’ll talk to ZeWu-Jun, so he knows not to listen to your nonsense either.”

“I’ve already talked to him.” Lan SiZhui admitted. Lan JingYi glared more. Lan SiZhui closed his eyes for a moment, then reached out and touched Lan JingYi’s hand that was resting on the table, fingers curled into a fist. At his touch, Lan JingYi took his hand and squeezed. “I don’t like this any more than you. But we cannot count on having changed

things. As past events proved, even if we try to change history, somehow things still happen that we've tried to stop from happening. I don't know what will happen, I don't know if it will happen, but JingYi, the chances that the Wen, my family, will end up in Qiongqi again are high."

"Then..." Lan SiZhui could already hear it in his tone. Here it came. "Then I'll go with. If you're sure they will suffer, it's better to have two cultivators than one. You don't have your spiritual powers anyways, so it makes sense that I also go. I don't mind not belonging to the Lan Sect if I have you."

"You can't." Lan SiZhui was already shaking his head as Lan JingYi began to talk. "JingYi, your only family is the Lan. I have the Wen and even Wei WuXian, but you only have the Lan. If you leave, you will be miserable and I don't want to be the reason for that. Please."

"I have a family again, remember? In Moling. But it doesn't matter. I don't care." Lan JingYi shook his head as well. "You are all the family I need."

"I know, but we can't both go." Lan SiZhui sighed.

"Why not?" Lan JingYi asked. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

"Do you remember after Guanyin temple, when I went away with Wen Ning?"

"Yes."

"It's like that." Lan SiZhui told him with an earnest expression.

"No, it's not. Back then you were always going to come back and now you're about to cut ties with the Lan entirely. This is nothing like that."

"I... JingYi, this is my responsibility. My family."

"I'm also your family and you are mine."

"So is Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun and Granduncle!" Lan SiZhui said at last, raising his voice a little. He continued, quieter. "If I'm not here to take care of them, who will? You are the only person I'd want by their sides and look after them."

"They can take care of themselves."

"And I can't?" Lan JingYi flinched at that and Lan SiZhui also regretted saying it.

"I didn't mean it like that." He said and Lan SiZhui nodded.

"I know. Sorry. I just... I need you to stay here."

"I don't want to stay if you're going to leave."

"This isn't the end of the world. This isn't the end of us either. Once the danger has been dealt with, we can return to normal. We could... We could even go home. To the future."



“Why can’t we go home now? Let’s do it.”

“We can’t, not yet.” Lan SiZhui shook his head sadly. “Jin Ling... his father...” He shook his head again. “At least we need to stay until the Wen had been dealt with and the danger had gone away. We need to figure out how to deal with the Stygian Tiger Amulet as well.”

“Which is exactly why we need to stay together. We need to plan all of that, and only then can you go.” Lan SiZhui huffed, amused that Lan JingYi was trying so hard to convince him. There was a pause and then Lan JingYi took hold of his hands and his voice turned a little pleading. “You and I, we were supposed to do this together. We were supposed to become the most powerful senior disciples; the juniors would be looking up to us and admire us as we admire our own seniors. Don’t leave me alone when we just started making a name for ourselves!” Lan SiZhui chuckled.

“Who says we cannot be together later? Hanguang-Jun and Senior Wei are also the most respected people between the four Sects, even though Senior Wei doesn’t have a Sect. We will be just like them.”

“Lan SiZhui, are you comparing yourself to the person who dies in a few years?! Is that supposed to be reassuring?!” Lan JingYi glared at him and Lan SiZhui had to bow his head to laugh at the outrage on his friend’s face.

“Alright, alright, maybe this wasn’t the best example.” He grinned. “After all, you won’t let me die, will you?”

“If it were up to me, I wouldn’t even let you leave my side ever! Of course, I won’t let you die!”

“Then trust me, JingYi, please.” Lan SiZhui’s tone softened as he asked this, looking into Lan JingYi’s eyes.

“I trust you. It’s the rest of the world I don’t trust.” Lan JingYi grumbled. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“You sound like Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui said with a smile, knowing that Lan JingYi was going to take this personally.

“First you leave, now you’re throwing insults at me. We should hang out with Jin Ling less, his personality is rubbing off on you.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui grinned. Lan JingYi’s tone was calmer and Lan SiZhui saw it on his face that slowly but surely he began to accept his decision. Lan SiZhui was glad. He wasn’t sure how long he would be able to plead and argue with Lan JingYi.

“What am I supposed to do without you here? I’m the worst Lan ever. I will constantly get into trouble. I will speak out of turn and offend everyone. I will skip my meditation all the time. I will spill ink everywhere. I will cause so much trouble, they will end up kicking me out as well. Why can’t we just skip that and go away together?”

“I need you to be here.” Lan SiZhui said. “Please, JingYi.”

“I don’t like this. Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen don’t need my help. They’re some of the most powerful cultivators of this generation.”

“Even they make mistakes.” Lan SiZhui thought briefly of the whip scars on Hanguang-Jun’s back. He thought of Lan XiChen’s face at Guanyin temple as he stabbed Jin GuangYao. The Jades were powerful, yes, but they were also human. Sometimes Lan JingYi forgot this but Lan SiZhui didn’t.

“How about this: how about I stay until Grandmaster wakes, then follow you?”

“JingYi...” Lan SiZhui sighed, tired of arguing.

“Just... Give me something here.” Lan JingYi said, frustrated. “You’re going away for who knows how long and I’m supposed to do what in the meantime? Follow Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun around like a lost puppy?”

“I’m sure ZeWu-Jun would appreciate some help with Sect business?” Lan SiZhui offered and Lan JingYi glared at him. Lan SiZhui shrugged. “Just an idea.”

“We need to plan first. We agreed to meet at the Crowd Hunt to plan, what about that?”

“I don’t think I can attend it if I have to look after the Wen.”

“One more reason why I need to go with you.”

“JingYi...”

“Why are you rushing so much?” Lan JingYi shook his head immediately. “Stupid question. Still, we have time still. We can... We can visit Jin Ling. Yes. Let’s visit him and talk this through first. If he agrees that you need to go, I’ll be fine with that.”

“We don’t know when the Wen were taken. It could be any minute.”

“What about--” Lan JingYi began, but Lan SiZhui sighed, tired of arguing about this a lot.

“Look, JingYi, I’ve made up my mind already.”

“Thanks for asking me about it first!” Lan JingYi said, glaring at him. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“I just didn’t want... JingYi, this is...”

“This is selfish is what it is.” Lan JingYi said and Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened. Lan JingYi seemed satisfied that Lan SiZhui was finally paying proper attention and said: “I’m not mad about you wanting to go and save your family. In this, naturally, I support you. You’re my brother in all but blood and you will forever be. I want what’s the best for you and those you care about, even if I have my own issues with them. You know that, right? That’s not why you don’t want me to go, is it?”

“Of course, not!” Lan SiZhui protested, annoyed. “I don’t want you to come because I want to do this alone and I want you to stay here and take care of the Lan. I don’t want you to

come with me just to regret it later. And besides, this is my burden, not yours. It's one thing to be my brother, but you're not me. You don't owe the same debts as I do."

"Can't I help you repay said debts then?"

"I don't want you to." At this, Lan JingYi was quiet for a long time and Lan SiZhui was incredibly nervous. He didn't want this to come between them. After a while, Lan JingYi grunted, annoyed.

"Will you come to the Crowd Hunt?"

"I don't think I can." Lan SiZhui said with regret.

"But—!" Lan JingYi began protesting.

"How about afterwards?" Lan SiZhui offered before Lan JingYi could get into it. "A week later?"

"That's too far away. How about this then, how about me and Jin Ling go to Dafan right after we're dismissed?"

"That also works I think." Lan SiZhui hummed thoughtfully. "Assuming I will have somewhere to stay. Let's talk about this in writing once I'm there."

"Fine." Lan JingYi grumbled. "And you'll write me every week?"

"Without missing a week." Lan SiZhui nodded.

"And you'll get Lady Wen to examine you and treat you?"

"I don't know how much she will be able to help, but sure." Lan SiZhui nodded again. Lan JingYi sighed.

"I hate this. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I think I'm starting to understand Wei WuXian and Jiang WanYin's relationship." At this, Lan SiZhui blinked. "I mean, he always threatens and berates Wei WuXian, but at the same time, he also loves him, right? I feel like that right now. I hate you so much, but at the same time, I also love you." Lan SiZhui chuckled, bowing his head to hide the moisture in his eyes.

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Lan SiZhui left two days later. He didn't want to delay his departure too much. The day before, he went to Lan XiChen once again to tell him his decision was permanent and that Lan JingYi now knew about it. As Lan XiChen was digesting the news with a cup of tea, Lan SiZhui waited anxiously what his answer was going to be.

“I cannot say I am pleased with this decision, but this is yours to make and I won’t stray you from it. However, I want you to know something.” At the serious tone Lan SiZhui sat up slightly straighter and gave Lan XiChen all his attention. “Although you think the Lan Sect would not want to protect the Wen, we will not sit by and watch innocents being treated unjustly, whatever their surname may be. If Jin Ling is right and the Jin will come for the Wen, I want you to let us know. Despite our parting, we are still your family and even if you do not ask us, if we hear about such happenings, the Lan Sect will go and help out.”

Lan SiZhui smiled at that, feeling grateful. “Thank you.” He said quietly and Lan XiChen shook his head.

“I don’t do this for your gratitude, but because our Sect is supposed to uphold these values. I’m ashamed that in your own future, we did not apply ourselves when the situation got like this.”

“It’s not ZeWu-Jun’s fault.” Even though Lan SiZhui said that, he didn’t actually know. For all he knew, Lan XiChen could have been the very person to suggest that every Wen must be imprisoned, though Lan SiZhui doubted that, seeing he knew Lan XiChen’s temperament, this didn’t fit him at all.

“Perhaps not directly, but seeing that you’re here and of what I’ve gathered of the future... I could’ve done more.” He paused, then shook his head. “However, that’s not the point right now. SiZhui, are you sure you want this? You surely want to leave?”

Lan SiZhui nodded, unable to say the words. After all, who would want to part from the family that gave them so much and he gave so little in return? He didn’t want to leave, no, but this was not something he got to chose.

“When?” Lan XiChen asked next.

“Perhaps even tomorrow.” Lan SiZhui said. “The longer I stay the more I hesitate and the more danger my family is in.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Though I’d have preferred to have more time... I understand.”

“Thank you, Sect Leader Lan.” Lan SiZhui bowed. Lan XiChen sighed and shook his head.

“There’s nothing to thank.”

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The next day after lunch and before dark, Lan SiZhui packed his things. Lan JingYi sat in the room, absently plucking Hudie’s strings. Lan SiZhui had told him about the resentful energy and the Stygian Tiger Amulet clinging to his guqin and Lan JingYi wanted to see if he could summon it as well. Expecting he wouldn’t be able to, Lan SiZhui had let him do so until he got ready.

“You know, Jin Ling is going to be mad you didn’t tell him either.”

“I sent him a letter yesterday.” Lan SiZhui said as he folded some clothes.

“Well, he’s still going to be angry. Maybe he will even go and yell at you for it then you’ll see this was a stupid decision.” Lan JingYi said, his tone light though there was a displeased furrow between his brows. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“Mhmm.” He hummed, not willing to drag this argument out even more.

They were quiet for a time, then: “You can still change your mind. Either about leaving or taking me. I can pack fast, I don’t need much.”

Lan SiZhui straightened. He was done. He didn’t have much either, and he didn’t want to take too many clothes, since he was going to have to get new ones anyways. He just packed a few nightgowns and neccessities along with some talisman paper and normal paper, ink and charcoal.

“I’m finished.” Lan SiZhui said, then held out his hand for Hudie. Lan JingYi reluctantly gave it away and Lan SiZhui quickly checked, but the guqin remained dormant, not oozing resentful energy as it could.

“I’ll accompany you to Caiyi. I already told ZeWu-Jun, so there’s no point arguing.” Lan SiZhui nodded, not even pretending to want to put up a fight.

They left Lan SiZhui’s rooms. Before he left, he wanted to go somewhere, and so, he led Lan JingYi not towards the gates but towards the back mountains. The path was familiar and one Lan JingYi also knew well, so halfway, Lan JingYi ran ahead. As Lan SiZhui caught up with him, he saw his friend standing between some bunnies and smiled. They haven’t really been here since returning to the past and now Lan SiZhui kneeled, waiting for a bunny to hop up to him. He held out his hand and the little creature sniffed it then began to lick it.

They spent a few minutes there, but then Lan SiZhui sighed, said it was time to go and so the two of them headed – not towards the gates, once again. Lan SiZhui wanted to see the Jingshi one more time, just to take it in. They stopped and Lan SiZhui watched the house where he half-grew up at. He smiled, then bowed to the scenery. Only then did he turn towards the gates.

They walked past the Hanshi, the Lanshi, the Library pavilion until finally, they have arrived at the gates. Lan XiChen was already there, three disciples by his side in a neat line. The one closest to the gates was holding a bundle of something, the others empty-handed. Lan SiZhui’s brows furrowed as they got closer.

Once they reached them, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed, so did the disciples to them. Lan XiChen inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“SiZhui. Unfortunately, since you’re ChunYu-Jun, a celebrated hero of the Sunshot Campaign and fought by the Lan’s side, we have to do an official parting. HanSu here,” he gestured to his left the boy closest to him stepped forward and bowed, “will bear witness.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then passed his bag to Lan JingYi, stepping forward and bowing deeply.

“Sect Leader Lan, I, Wen Yuan, would like to withdraw and leave the Lan Sect. Please grant permission.”

Lan XiChen lifted his chin and straightened up, assuming the air of a Sect Leader.

“I grant permission. I relieve Lan SiZhui from his duties in the Lan Sect. Would he ever return, we will also take him back without argument, for he is a former disciple of the Lan Sect. SiZhui. You will have to give back the forehead ribbon, but you may keep your jade token, as a token of our trust and symbol that you’ve once belonged to the Lan Sect. The sword and guqin you received from the Lan Sect are our gift to you in life, take good care of them. You may also keep the name we gave you. Not only does it belong to you now, it is also dangerous to use your former surname at this time.”

“Sect Leader Lan, I am grateful for your kindness and your care.” Lan SiZhui saluted with perfect posture.

“You may also receive a small portion of necessities to aid in the parting process.” With this, he waved forward the other two disciples at his side. The bundle was passed to Lan JingYi, being the one carrying Lan SiZhui’s belongings, and the other pulled out a little pouch from his sleeve – money. “And this is my gift to you.”

“ZeWu-Jun—” Lan SiZhui began, but at Lan XiChen’s look remained silent instead.

“Your forehead ribbon.” Lan XiChen prompted quietly and Lan SiZhui nodded, untying the ribbon. He only had it for a little while, since he got it in Nightless City, but he already felt attached. He wasn’t sure where his old ribbon was – Lan XiChen said it was with Lan JingYi, back then, but Lan SiZhui never asked for it back and Lan JingYi never bought it up either.

When he presented the ribbon, Lan XiChen gestured to one of the disciples, who covered it with a cloth before picking it from Lan SiZhui’s hand, wrapping it carefully, then put it in a wooden box he got from his sleeve. Then, he presented the box to Lan JingYi.

“JingYi offered, earlier, to keep your things until or if you return.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui told Lan JingYi, who glared at him.

“I have enough cra—things lying around in my room, so come back and take them when you come back.”

Lan SiZhui smiled at him faintly, thinking Jin Ling’s temperament was truly rubbing off on them, then turned back to Lan XiChen.

“Thank you, boys, you’re free to go now.” Lan XiChen told the three disciples, who bowed to him then to Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui, murmuring:

“Feng CiKe, ChunYu-Jun, have a good trip.”

Once they were gone, Lan XiChen exhaled, shoulders dropping. “I meant what I’ve said. If you ever change your mind, we will receive you with open arms. The elders also agreed and so this will be in effect even if I’m not the Sect Leader anymore.”

“How did you get the elders to agree, ZeWu-Jun?” Lan JingYi asked. “I thought they’d want to punish SiZhui and be glad he’s gone from the Sect.”

“I thought the same thing.” Lan XiChen nodded. Lan SiZhui agreed. “Only after explaining to them that every crime Lan SiZhui had committed he’d done so with my knowledge and approval, did they agree.”

“But—!” Lan SiZhui wanted to protest, but Lan XiChen raised a hand.

“Since the circumstances were extreme – we were at war, after all – and I’m Sect Leader, I don’t have to face punishment, granted that if you ever return, it will be with renewed righteousness and the loss of your... heretical path.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui nodded, committing the conditions to memory. “I’m sorry for failing you.”

“You didn’t fail anything and anyone. SiZhui, you saved our lives and for that, we thank you.”

“Mn.”

“It’s...” Lan JingYi began, then paused when the two of them looked at him. “Ah, it’s better if we get going.”

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui quickly took at least one bag from Lan JingYi, though his friend didn’t let him take both. Once they were done distributing their burdens, they turned to Lan XiChen, who then smiled at them, though it was a sad smile.

“Be good, SiZhui. Don’t hesitate to call for help, would you ever need it. And write.”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.”

“I won’t stall you anymore.” Lan XiChen sighed. “Take care of yourself.”

Lan SiZhui nodded, then added: “You don’t remember, ZeWu-Jun, but you’re also my family. Please, look after yourself, Hanguang-Jun, Grandmaster and JingYi while I’m gone.”

“Of course.” They shared another look, then Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed, then stepped onto the path leading down from the Cloud Recesses. Lan SiZhui looked back over his shoulder, one more time. He suspected it wouldn’t be the case, but he couldn’t help feel disappointed that Lan Wangji didn’t come to say goodbye. He sighed, and before Lan JingYi could notice his grave mood, he turned to his friend who was watching him patiently.

“Let’s go.”

With this, the two of them started down the mountain.



It was strange, Lan SiZhui felt, to be out in Caiyi without his forehead ribbon. He grew up here, so he was used to coming to town, but he never came here without his ribbon, not even after the Burial Mounds. Him and Lan JingYi arrived late in the afternoon, late enough that no one would take Lan SiZhui on boat anymore. He had to wait for tomorrow morning. Until then, Lan JingYi suggested they find an inn and take a rest. Lan SiZhui didn't see harm in this, so he agreed. The two of them went to an inn where the waiter bowed deeply.

"Esteemed cultivator, would you and your friend like to stay?" Lan SiZhui froze. Lan JingYi frowned. Then, together, they shared a look. Lan SiZhui's was wide and startled, Lan JingYi's equally as wide, but full of disbelief and some anger.

"Ah, yes, sir." Lan SiZhui turned back to the waiter. "If it isn't too much trouble." The waiter glanced between the two of them, then bowed again and led them to a table while their room got ready. They ordered tea and some dinner.

"This will get some used to." Lan JingYi grumbled unhappy. Lan SiZhui chuckled.

"Don't be so angry. I never expected anyone to address me with respect just because they could tell I'm a Lan. At least now I get my wish, hm?"

"Must you see this as a good thing?" Lan JingYi frowned. "It was weird." Lan SiZhui just shrugged, not knowing what to say to that. "Speaking of good things. You know, this means you can consume alcohol now freely." Lan JingYi mentioned in an offhanded tone, though his eyes were twinkling with mischief and he was eying the table next to theirs where a few friends were sharing Emperor's Smile. Lan SiZhui hummed, deadpan.

"You, however, can not." He told his friend as he pointedly sipped his tea. Lan JingYi made a face at him as he toyed with his own cup.

"Lan SiZhui, your fathers are Hanguang-Jun and Senior Wei, yet you resemble Hanguang-Jun in everything but emotions. Why can't you be a bit more like Senior Wei?"

Lan SiZhui didn't answer that, and soon, their dinner was delivered. They ate and Lan JingYi carried a light conversation about food and such. Lan SiZhui didn't tell him to keep quiet during meals and listened instead, humming and answering briefly at the right times. When they finished, they hired a room and went to bed. Lan JingYi didn't seem to want to sleep for a long time, staying up and chatting, way past curfew. They talked about mundane things for once, about the process of rebuilding Cloud Recesses, about other Sects, things like that. Then Lan SiZhui couldn't keep his eyes open anymore and so they went to bed.

The next day they woke at the same time and had breakfast before setting off. Lan JingYi was uncharacteristically quiet. Lan SiZhui didn't comment on it. As they finished, Lan JingYi stalled, wanting to drink one more tea, wanting one more bite. Lan SiZhui didn't have the heart to say no to him, but eventually, Lan JingYi ran out of excuses.

They arrived to the harbor where they managed to hire a boat. Lan JingYi was nervous, fidgeting with Zhameng in his hand.



“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui said as he waited the rower to get the boat ready. Lan JingYi turned to him with a frown.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with? It’s fine, I don’t need my stuff, we can get clothes for me and—”

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui repeated, then held out his arms. Lan JingYi stepped into the hug a little desperately. They clung to each other, Lan JingYi squeezing tightly and not letting go for a long time. Finally, Lan SiZhui pushed him away gently, putting his hands on his shoulder, touching their foreheads together. “Everything will be alright.”

“How would you know?” Lan JingYi protested with a pout.

“Because it’s you and me. We’re always fine.” Lan JingYi sniffed loudly.

“I don’t want you to go.” He said quietly. Lan SiZhui sighed and pulled him back into a hug. Lan JingYi held onto him.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered into Lan JingYi’s ear, and his friend held him tighter. They stayed like that for long minutes until eventually Lan SiZhui pulled away, squeezing Lan JingYi’s hand one last time before stepping away.

“I have something for you.” Lan JingYi said, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows but waited as Lan JingYi reached into his sleeve and pulled out a little something. It was wrapped in blue paper, the kind they wrapped food for night-hunts in Cloud Recesses. He held it out.

“What’s this?” Lan SiZhui asked as he took it carefully. It was soft and very light, almost no weight to it.

“A reminder that I hope you’ll consider very carefully.” Lan JingYi said, but when Lan SiZhui reached to open it, he quickly protested. “Don’t open it yet. When you get to Dafan, you can open it then. Okay?”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I’ll see you soon?”

“Undoubtedly.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him and Lan JingYi nodded, inhaling deeply.

“Alright, go. The boat is waiting. Ah, if you get sick, get the rower to stop. And when you get to Dafan, make sure Lady Wen also examines you. And eat healthy even if it costs much. Write if you need money. And write anyways. Often.”

“I will.” Lan SiZhui hid Lan JingYi’s present into his sleeve, then took a step back and bowed. Lan JingYi choked on nothing.

“What are you doing?! Don’t do this. It makes me uncomfortable.”

Lan SiZhui straightened up and laughed at him. Lan JingYi also looked amused.

“Goodbye, JingYi.”

“Goodbye, SiZhui.” Lan JingYi said, lower lip trembling. Lan SiZhui turned and got into the boat, then sat down and turned to see Lan JingYi. The rower pushed the boat away from shore. Lan JingYi waved and Lan SiZhui waved back. Then when they got out of earshot, he suddenly jumped and ran along the shore to follow them. Lan SiZhui looked on concerned, but then Lan JingYi stopped at a vendor and talked to the salesman. Before he could get out of sight, he was back on the shore again and leaned in to throw something at Lan SiZhui. He caught it. It was a bag of almonds, Lan SiZhui’s favorite snack. He looked up and grinned at Lan JingYi, who also grinned at him, not following anymore, just waved with wide moves. Lan SiZhui waved back.

A few minutes later Lan JingYi got so small and the shore so distant he blended into the crowd. Lan SiZhui hugged the bag of almonds to his chest and inhaled deeply, turning to look out onto the river.

Lan SiZhui left his home but he was also heading towards it.

## Perception II.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan SiZhui knew his journey would take some time, but he didn't realize just how long it would be. He'd only been to Dafan via sword. Even when they discovered Senior Wei for the first time and brought him back to the Cloud Recesses, they've taken him by sword, leaving behind Lan LuoHan behind to bring Little Apple back. The disciple complained three days later, when he finally arrived, that the animal was a horrible, terrible thing and he hated it. He also revealed, only to his disciple brothers, that he thought about exchanging the donkey to another one but thought it may be too obvious, since any other donkey would behave better.

Lan SiZhui thought that was why his mate's journey took so long, but now he had to realize Lan LuoHan made really good time with a reluctant companion. Lan SiZhui arrived to Yingzu at night even though he'd departed in the morning. He knew the journey from Gusu to Yunmeng took about ten hours on boat, and he knew the way from YiLing to Yunmeng was about three to five hours by boat – though that was downstream. As he chatted the rower, the man revealed that meant the boat could drift on the current, while upstream they had to row themselves. Lan SiZhui was not familiar with the way of boats, so he listened with wonder. This meant what was three to five hours downstream, depending on the weather – the rower also revealed in dry weather it took a bit longer while in rainy months the river ran fast – was about six or seven hours upstream.

Yingzu was almost across from YiLing on the other side of the river, so the journey took about the same time. Lan SiZhui wasn't overly familiar with this place, but he found an inn quick enough and settled for the night. As he went to bed, he fell asleep right away, the day-long journey exhausting him greatly, even though he hardly did any of the work.

In the morning he sought a carriage and they set off early enough. The driver told him that it would take two days to get there if they traveled all day long. Lan SiZhui accepted this and sat in the carriage, dozing and meditating. They stopped for meals and for the night as well, in a city Lan SiZhui didn't know. Then in the morning they continued as planned. When night fell, they were still some hours away, so the driver proposed they get some sleep and proceed in the morning, so they found a village and got rooms in an inn.

In the morning they set off once again, for the last time. Even though the driver said they could be there in two days, the summer heat slowed them down since the horses were also tired, the humid air making their trot slower than expected. Lan SiZhui didn't mind, though he was annoyed, he didn't show it. The man could not control the weather and the animals were working hard already.

They arrived to Buddha's Feet after lunch. Only then did it occur to Lan SiZhui he didn't actually know where the Wen village was exactly. He knew it was in the mountains somewhere, but other than the way to the Dancing Fairy's temple and back to Buddha's Feet, Lan SiZhui hadn't been to this place.

Parting from the carriage driver, Lan SiZhui looked around. Buddha's Feet was as he remembered it. The town was bright and lively, more so than in the future. Many people were out on the street, talking and walking around. Lan SiZhui watched as some people played Weiqi under a tree, many others gathered around, placing bets and giving suggestions. He looked on as a mother picked up her wailing child then buy him the candy he was crying for. The streets of Gusu and Caiyi were lined with vendors, but here it seemed even more overwhelming, rows and rows of stalls, people yelling out their offers.

Lan SiZhui went up to the first stall that seemed empty enough of customers – he didn't want to hold up anyone who was about to strike a deal. The vendor greeted him cheerfully, offering his goods right away.

"Sir, would you like some fish, it's the best in the area, we hunt in a nearby lake, so it's fresh, too!"

Lan SiZhui smiled at him, nodding in acknowledgement. "Sir, sorry for the trouble, I'm not here to buy." He bowed apologetically, and the man laughed awkwardly, returning the bow.

"That's fine, sir, you must be a traveler – what can I help you with?"

Lan SiZhui was grateful for his excuse and said: "Sir, I'm looking for a village in the mountains. A branch of the Wen family lives there. Do you happen to know where it might be?"

The vendor smiled at him stiffly. "Ah, sir, please, don't ask about that." He shook his head. Lan SiZhui looked at him confused.

"Ah, but..." Before he could continue, the man said:

"I have an honest business here, and I have nothing to do with these kind of matters." Lan SiZhui was confused hearing this answer.

"Sir? What do you mean by that?"

"I don't want to get into trouble, young sir, please, go now." The vendor bowed apologetically. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"Sir, why would this get you into trouble? Is there something I should know?"

"I'm sorry, sir, please leave now." Lan SiZhui watched him with furrowed brows for a long moment. The man seemed eager to have him leave. He didn't want to cause trouble, though he wanted to know why the man thought telling him would get him into trouble, he just pressed his lips together, bowed his head and left.

Surely, the man had a good reason to drive him away and not answer his question, but one Lan SiZhui couldn't even begin to guess. He looked around to see if anyone else was willing to help him. He spotted another vendor who seemed to not have many costumers, and went over there.

"Good day, madam." He greeted her and she returned his bow elegantly.

“Young man, good day to you! Are you here to buy something for your beloved? We have the finest combs in all of Buddha’s Feet, ask anyone. We’re responsible for many marriages in the area with our gifts, I can assure you!” She beamed at him and Lan SiZhui felt a little bad about not buying. Still, he went on:

“Sorry, madam, I’m not here to buy.” She blinked at him confused, looking around.

“Ah, but young man, why are you here then, what can this lady help if not with the matters of the heart?”

“I am looking for a place on Dafan Mountain and I hoped you could help me.” Lan SiZhui explained and she seemed no less confused. “Madam, do you happen to know where the nearby Wen village is?” He hoped that the rejecting answer was only the fisherman’s protest and this vendor would answer him readily, but he had to be disappointed.

“Ah, young man, please, don’t get me into this kind of trouble. The Dafan Wen are good people but their Sect Leader Wen RuoHan had betrayed the cultivation world and brought the anger of them onto us. Please, leave now.” She bowed deeply to him. Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“Madam, a fisherman I’ve asked earlier gave me the same answer, why are you telling me this?”

“Please, leave now.” He hoped, since she was slightly more talkative than the man that she would tell him, but it seemed he was out of luck. He didn’t want to cause trouble, so he obeyed, bowing and departing.

For a little while he went around the market, asking people, but all their answers were similar.

“Sir, this will get us into trouble, if you’re asking for the Wen, we don’t want to have anything to do with this. Please, leave us alone.” Said a group of men who had been dining at one of the restaurants. Lan SiZhui dropped his shoulders and bowed before moving on. What was it that would get them into trouble, he still didn’t know. As he turned away from the men, he caught a man looking at him curiously not far from him, probably in hearing range. As Lan SiZhui caught his eye, the man smiled at him and made a gesture with his head, that Lan SiZhui guessed meant to go to him. He went.

“Sir, I hear you’re looking for the Wen village in the mountains.” A spark of hope bloomed in Lan SiZhui’s chest.

“Ah, yes, sir, I am! Do you happen to know where it is?”

“I do, I do.” He nodded. “I’ve seen you’ve been asking about this matter all over the market. How about I take you there?”

“Take me, sir?” Lan SiZhui blinked, then the meaning sunk in and he beamed. “Ah, sir, I cannot possibly trouble you with this. It is enough if you point me in the direction, then I’ll get there on my own.” He said and the man smiled at him.

“It is no trouble at all, since myself will go there anyways, I can take you there.”

“Truly?” Lan SiZhui brightened with hope and shifted his bags on his shoulders that had been dragging him down in the past hours while he was asking about the village. The man also had one on his shoulder, a round, long basket he was carrying with his back bent, like it was so heavy he couldn’t bear the weight. “Ah, sir, are you sure it’s no trouble?”

“I’m sure, I’m sure.” The man waved him off. “But I’m afraid I’m not as young as I used to be and my goods don’t sell as well either, so I’m afraid sir has to keep a slower pace for my benefit.”

“Do you need help with your burden? It’s the least I can do since you’re the only one willing to take me.”

“Sir, look at yourself, carrying two bags of your own and two swords as well, I’m sure you have enough burden on your own. How could I ask you to bring mine as well? It’s fine, it’s fine, but you’ll have to walk slower, I can’t keep up with your pace.” He repeated with a smile. Lan SiZhui returned it and bowed deeply.

“In that case, I entrust myself to you, good sir.”

“Come, this way, this way.” The man gestured with his head, then began to walk down the street. For a little while they walked in town, some people stopping their conversations to look at them. Lan SiZhui spotted the fisherman and the comb-lady discussing with their heads put together as well, looking up and watching as Lan SiZhui followed the man. He nodded to them and the two quickly turned away. Lan SiZhui frowned and turned to the man.

“Ah, sir, may I ask you a question?” He asked politely, but the man waved him off.

“In a minute, in a minute.” He kept quiet until they got away from the market and onto a side-street that led into the forest surrounding the town. There, he said: “I suspect you want to ask why is everyone so afraid to tell you where the Wen are, correct?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Right.” The man sighed. He looked tired. “Sir, you might not know this, but not long ago the four Sects have defeated Wen RuoHan, the Wen Sect’s Sect Leader.” Lan SiZhui nodded and didn’t say he knew since he was right there, distracting Wen RuoHan while his brother stabbed him with Lan SiZhui’s sword. “Since then, the great Sects had been going after the Wen, collecting their people to collect into camps and interrogate them about their role in the war.”

“But why would that make people scared to tell me the place?” Lan SiZhui wondered aloud. Internally, he thought he hoped this didn’t mean innocents were treated unjustly.

“Sir, that is exactly why.” The man nodded. “Since the Sects view everyone who associates themselves with the Wen their accomplices, they do not want to associate with them. Telling you where the village is, they would admit to having dealt with them in the past or having a relation with them, and they want to deny any such claims.”

Lan SiZhui frowned at that, finding ill logic in this thinking. But it wasn't like he had the right to judge these people. They were scared, although Lan SiZhui wasn't sure how rightfully. He decided to ask.

"Sir, do you know how much the Sects had been bothering the Wen civilians?"

"Ah, sir, if you're worried, you needn't to be. The Sects only bother those who are Wen in blood. There's no need for you to worry, as long as you let them know you're not..." By the end, he sounded a little unsure, casting sideways glances at Lan SiZhui. He nodded.

"By my knowledge, they also aren't supposed to bother those who had nothing to do with the war." Lan SiZhui said, trying to reassure the man – and perhaps himself, a little bit –, but he laughed bitterly.

"Sir, you must not know the cultivators very well. Even though this is what they say, the reality is always different. While a Sect might say they will ensure no further tragedies are going to happen in the area, a monster still comes along and kills people and they do nothing about it. Even though they say they're going to spare the innocent, how can they know who is innocent and who is lying or pretend to be?"

"If someone is against the four Sects, why would he hide it?" Lan SiZhui frowned. The man laughed.

"Good sir, you're very naïve, aren't you?" He smirked, shaking his head slowly, as if amused. For the first time, Lan SiZhui took a good look at him, wondering if he was a cultivator.

He didn't look particularly old. He looked to be in his thirties. He had a topknot, and despite the weight he was holding, not one strand of hair was out of place. He was dressed in a soft brown robe, not giving away neither his status, nor his family ties. He was also not carrying any weapon, let alone a sword. He looked to be a completely normal, everyday civilian, who was selling whatever was in his basket. He was taller than Lan SiZhui, not by much, but enough that if they were to converse face to face, Lan SiZhui would have to look slightly up. He had a soft mustache above his lips and some hair also grew on his chin, though it looked a little patchy.

"Let me tell you something, sir." The man said, leaning a little closer, as if wanting to say in confidence, though they were completely alone on the mountain trail now, surrounded by lush forests, the humidity of the air choking. Even birds sparsely tweeted, though cicadas were heard. "Cultivation Sects are not at all how they seem. When they're feeling charitable and gracious, they are going to help you. But when it is inconvenient to them, they are not going to bother listening. We see this time and time again, so the rest of us are at the mercy of the temperament of our cultivation Sects.

"When they're not feeling gracious, but feeling angry their anger is unforgiving. Even though they could bother to figure out who is innocent and who is not, they won't. So instead, they are just going to say everyone they deem evil is evil, and then give a good excuse as to why they involve the old and sick in those groups as well. *They must be lying*, they'll say, *to save their own skin and get away with murder*. And who would bother to prove them wrong? They're immortal gods who come and save us when we cannot save ourselves. This is why

sir, when you ask a random vendor in Buddha's Feet, he's not going to say anything, because he is afraid he will be viewed as one of the Wen."

"But..." Lan SiZhui continued to frown, disliking the man's view on the cultivation Sects, but also seeing his point. "If they deny information, aren't they just acting suspicious? Wouldn't the cultivators think they were trying to help the Wen by not telling them the place?"

"But sir, why would cultivators ask vendors about this kind of thing?" The man looked at him surprised. "They don't ask the common folks about these kind of things. They can also just hop on their flying swords and look over the mountains, so they can easily find the Wen village that way. What use is asking around, when flying is more convenient?"

"Oh." Lan SiZhui didn't think about that. But the man was right, if Lan SiZhui had his spiritual powers, he most likely would've searched from his sword, not bothering to land in a town just to ask around. "Ah, sir, thank you for enlightening me." Lan SiZhui turned to him and bowed, but at this, the man seemed embarrassed and uncomfortable. He let out an awkward chuckle.

"Ah, sir, please, don't thank me. I should actually apologize, giving such lectures to strangers, what am I thinking! Ah, my first son was just born not long ago and I'm already acting like I'm wise and all-knowing. Forgive me for the rudeness." He returned the bow.

There was a moment then, when they kept walking, but before the moment could pass, Lan SiZhui decided to ask again:

"Ah, sir, so, since everyone had been rejecting me, why are you willing to take me to the Wen village?"

"Sir, have you not figured it out?" The man looked surprised. "It's because that's where I live. There was no point denying you, since you're alone and didn't arrive by a flying sword, even though you have two swords. You mustn't be a cultivator, or if you are, then you're careful to appear non-threatening, so I thought this young man was looking for my home not out of malice but genuine interest, and I wanted to help."

"You live in the Wen village?" Lan SiZhui was surprised this time. "Then that means you're..."

"My surname is Wen, yes." The man said, though he was smiling good-naturedly. Lan SiZhui stopped and bowed to him.

"Ah, mister Wen, sorry for the trouble and thank you for the help!"

"Please, please!" The man quickly brought him out of his bow with a chuckle. "You're very kind, but I just told you it was really not a hardship at all." He smiled at Lan SiZhui when he straightened and Lan SiZhui smiled back, nodding. They began to walk again and Lan SiZhui wondered why the man didn't ask why he was there.



He said he saw that Lan SiZhui wasn't seeking the Wen out of malice but that didn't mean he had good intentions. Also, the man's earlier words suggested he didn't have great confidence in the good heart of others. What about Lan SiZhui reassured him he was not coming to hurt anyone? Or was that also just naïve from his part this time? But if Lan SiZhui would ask him why he didn't ask, that would look like he was questioning the good heart of this Wen man, so he couldn't ask straight.

They walked silently for a while, threading through the forest with the man's practiced ease. The mountain was beautiful. Lan SiZhui didn't have many fond memories from here, he'd only been on Dafan for night hunts, so he was glad to enjoy the area without the excitement of a night-hunt for once.

"Ah, sir, I didn't even ask your name yet!" The Wen man said after a while, as if it just occurred to him in that moment. He looked alarmed, but Lan SiZhui didn't see this as an insult. He smiled at the man and bowed deeply.

"This humble one is Lan Yuan, Lan SiZhui of—Ah, just Lan SiZhui." He quickly corrected himself, frightened that he almost associated himself with the Lan out of habit. This, among with many other things, would also need some getting used to.

"Mister Lan, this one is Wen Xin, courtesy name XiaoQiang." Wen XiaoQiang bowed in return. The name sounded familiar and Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows, trying to remember where he'd heard the name before. He couldn't remember. It felt like he should know and this was important, but somehow, he couldn't recall. He thought it might've been one of the Wen who was rescued from Qiongqi by Wei WuXian and later lived with them, but it was hard to recall anyone's name or even face from that time. Lan SiZhui didn't have many memories, still, even though more and more things came back to him, there were still many he couldn't remember.

After exchanging courtesies, they kept walking in a comfortable silence. It didn't take long from there, to reach the village.

"We're close now, mister Lan." Wen XiaoQiang said, and Lan SiZhui appreciated the warning.

"Mn." Lan SiZhui acknowledged it with a nod, looking out for signs of the village. He had no idea which way they had been going, didn't pay much attention to the road. He imagined if he ever had to come here alone he would have difficulty finding the place, but he wasn't sure if this was intentional on Wen XiaoQiang's part or not.

There was a wide road they took, framed by trees, barely any signs that anyone walked it, though it was clear people used it. From a turn in the road they saw it right away. There were houses hidden behind the bushes, made of stone, simple in material and colors, which also faded due to the weather conditions they were exposed to. The road led through a gate with a wide foundation, and in front of it was a stool with a basket in front of it, a lady sitting on it, reaching down into the basket. She pulled out some bamboo splints. She put them in her lap, then shook one out, then she weaved it into the construction held in her hand. It looked like the beginnings of a basket, the same kind Wen XiaoQiang was carrying.

As they got closer, they heard the village too, the buzzing noise becoming human sounds – speech, laughter and the likes. Lan SiZhui followed Wen XiaoQiang to the gate, where he turned to the old lady. Lan SiZhui was startled by how familiar she looked. Was she...?

“Granny, I’ve returned.” Wen XiaoQiang said, leaning down to talk to her. She smiled up at him, reaching up and patting his cheek.

“Welcome back, Xin-er.” She croaked, her eyes kind. Lan SiZhui smiled at the scene.

“Come on, you shouldn’t sit out here. What if it rains again, you remember what A-Qing said about that.” He helped her up, reaching for the basket at her feet, but Lan SiZhui was faster, picking it up. Wen XiaoQiang smiled at him, then gestured at the archway leading into the village. “You can put it there, so she can get it in the morning again easily.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui followed them, stopping briefly to put down the basket, then Wen XiaoQiang let go of her hand and shooed her towards one of the houses. There were already some people here, a man leaning on a broom, talking to a younger man. As they glanced at the old lady, they stopped talking and greeted her, then returned to their discussion.

Here the houses were packed close, the streets bare and narrow, nothing like what Lan SiZhui was used to. In GusuLan territory even the smallest, poorest villages were nice, streets wide and well-taken care of, nothing like the old, almost abandoned feeling he got from this place. A shiver ran down his spine as he looked around.

“Ah, mister Lan, I didn’t even ask what you were looking for in our humble village.” Wen XiaoQiang said. “Can I help you find it, whatever it is?” He asked earnestly and Lan SiZhui felt his cheeks heat.

It was not uncommon, especially since Wen Qing was a doctor, for her to see strangers, but still, looking for an unmarried woman as an unmarried man, it was a little easy to misunderstand if he was looking for her. Still, Lan SiZhui was a gentleman and hoped Wen XiaoQiang wouldn’t make assumptions either and so, he told him.

“Mister Wen, I’m looking for a friend of mine who lives here. She is a doctor and a famous one at that. Her name is Wen Qing. Do you happen to know where I find her?”

“Ah, of course, I know!” Wen XiaoQiang looked surprised. He bowed. “Please, follow me.” Lan SiZhui nodded and did just that as Wen XiaoQiang began to walk down the streets. Lan SiZhui tried to take it all in. There were men talking on the street, some pausing in their discussion to greet them or just to watch them pass. It was a strange feeling of being watched, but Lan SiZhui supposed he was intruding on their homes, so it was understandable.

Most people were dressed similarly to Wen XiaoQiang, their clothes soft brown and nondescript. Only some people wore the red of the Wen Sect. Some wore similar colors but not in style, a dull red with black sash, but nothing more to indicate their heritage.

Those people who weren’t talking on the streets were working; Lan SiZhui saw a group, where a woman and an old man watched as a young man climbed on a ladder and fixed the roof of a house. He saw a shoemaker making good of the hot weather and sitting outside,

bringing his stand out and making sawing motions on a leather strip he then attached to some slippers. There was a woman beating a rug not far from them. This village was as ordinary as any other.

They walked the streets for a little while, Wen XiaoQiang leading Lan SiZhui like a man who knew his destination, so Lan SiZhui didn't even question him when he brought Lan SiZhui to a house in the middle of the village. It was nicer than the others, better kept. It had a nice door and a little porch, its windows big, but curtained. As Wen XiaoQiang and Lan SiZhui approached the place, they also caught the smell of something herbal, which Lan SiZhui suspected to be medicine brewing.

The door was closed, so as they arrived, Wen XiaoQiang knocked gently, then waited until the door opened, revealing none other than Wen Ning. He looked pleasant and welcoming.

"Ah, uncle Wen, welcome! Is everything fine with the baby?"

"A-Ning, thank you for the question, the baby is fine." Wen XiaoQiang said with a fond smile, then stepped to the side to gesture at Lan SiZhui. "This mister Lan is looking for your sister, is she available right now to see to him?" At this, Wen Ning finally noticed Lan SiZhui and his whole face lit up. Beaming, he stepped outside, bowing low.

"Brother Lan!" He exclaimed. "You said you were going to visit us, but I didn't think it would be so soon!"

"Ah, sorry for the intrusion. I hope it is not too much trouble that I've showed up unannounced." Now that he thought about it, he should've probably asked if it was convenient for the Wen if he came. It just never really occurred him. He was invited and he did say he was going to visit once the war was over. He didn't think to send word ahead about his arrival, even though it would've been more proper, especially since he planned on staying for a while.

"Not at all! Brother Lan is always welcome here!" Wen Ning grinned. Wen XiaoQiang looked between the two of them, slightly baffled. But before he could voice his confusion, Wen Qing appeared in the doorway as well, sending a sharp look to Wen Ning, then Lan SiZhui.

"So, it's you." She said flippantly. Lan SiZhui bowed deeply.

"Wen Qing, sorry for the interruption."

"Hmph." She huffed, then turned to Wen Ning. "A-Ning, if it's not a customer, go back to the medicine. It will overcook." Wen Ning gasped, then hurried back inside, throwing apologies over his shoulder. Wen Qing shook her head with a small, fond smile playing in the corner of her lips. She turned back to Lan SiZhui. "So, you've come as you said."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded. "I hope it's not too much trouble." Wen Qing looked over him, her eyes settling on the two bags he was carrying. Her mouth thinned into a line, but thankfully she didn't comment on it right then. Instead, she turned her attention to the sword

on Lan SiZhui's back, wrapped in white cloth. She looked over at Wen XiaoQiang, then she stepped to the side.

"Come inside, both of you." She said, gesturing to the building. Lan SiZhui bowed, then complied, while Wen XiaoQiang smiled at her and did as told. The room they entered wasn't the main room but a receiving room and Wen Qing didn't lead them further inside, pulling the door closed, then gesturing to a small table. Wen XiaoQiang put down his basket, but before they could sit, Wen Qing spoke again. "Lan SiZhui. This is Wen XiaoQiang."

"Hm?" Lan SiZhui turned to her, not quite getting what she was trying to tell him. He nodded and said: "Ah, yes. He was kind enough and offered to show me the way from Buddha's Feet. Ah, sir, I wish to compensate you for the trouble." Lan SiZhui turned to him and reached into his sleeve to retrieve his money pouch, but the man shook his head, holding up his hand.

"Ah, please, mister Lan, there's no need for that. I was coming this way anyways."

"Lan SiZhui." Wen Qing said again, and Lan SiZhui turned back to her, something in her tone demanding his attention. She looked at him pointedly. "He is Wen XiaoQiang, Wen ChanYu's brother. He is the one whom Feixu belongs to."

Ah! That's where his name was so familiar from! Wen Qing and even Hua Qing had mentioned the name to him, but so much had happened during the Sunshot Campaign that he'd almost forgotten. Now, that he realized this, he turned to the man, who looked confused by their conversation and bowed to him deeply.

"Sir, so sorry for not realizing before!" Lan SiZhui apologized. He pulled Feixu off his back, still wrapped in the cloth and presented it to the man. "Sir, I don't know if you're aware, Doctor Wen probably already told you, but I'd like to present my own side of the story. Your brother had been present during the Wen indoctrination that the four Sects had been invited to. I was one of the cultivators brought there. Wen Chao one day decided to take us to a night-hunt, where we got trapped in a cave with an ancient and powerful monster; we also had to give up our swords in the beginning. Your brother was unfortunately one who lost his life in that cave to the monster.

"Later, me and my disciple mates were trying to find a way out of the cave and I needed a spiritual tool to find a way. Your brother's sword was the first one I picked up. I didn't realize who it belonged to until much later Doctor Wen informed me. I promised her then that I would bring the sword back to you by any means. Sir, I beg for your apology, for I didn't only took your family sword without permission, I also used it during the war against the Wen. I've killed people with your blade and for this, I never expect to be forgiven. Please, accept the sword and judge me."

Wen XiaoQiang was quiet in the face of Lan SiZhui's admission. Since Lan SiZhui was still bowing, he had no idea what expression he might have on his face, but he could imagine how anger and relief must've crossed it. Lan SiZhui felt terrible. Poor man said his first son was recently born and he probably wished to give the sword to him, but how could he, now that their own family's blood coated the beautiful blade?

“Lan SiZhui is also a Wen.” Wen Qing said unexpectedly. Wen XiaoQiang still didn’t take the sword from Lan SiZhui’s outstretched palms. It was fine. He would hold the sword out like this for days, if it meant eventually the man would take pity on him and accept his apology. “He is part of our Clan, though I myself am not sure who his parents are and he says he doesn’t know.”

“I see.” Wen XiaoQiang said, but Lan SiZhui couldn’t figure out his mood from this. There was another pause, but then the cloth in Lan SiZhui’s hand moved and Wen XiaoQiang hissed sharply as probably the sword was revealed for him, then the weight lifted off Lan SiZhui’s hands. He slowly looked up, watching as Wen XiaoQiang admired the sword, his thumb stroking over the characters on the scabbard before he grabbed the hilt and pulled it out, revealing the blade. Lan SiZhui cleaned the sword before he left Cloud Recesses, then once more before he left the inn this morning.

It was a good thing that Wen Qing invited them inside, so Lan SiZhui didn’t feel awkward about seeing the man’s grief on his face. He slid the blade back into the scabbard and looked over at Lan SiZhui. He bowed his head, a little afraid of the man’s reaction. What he didn’t expect was the respectful tone the man spoke to him with.

“Lan SiZhui, I am endlessly grateful for bringing the sword to me. You could’ve tossed it away any time and not feel guilty about it, but you decided to not only keep it but to put it to good use and bring it back to me.”

“Please, sir, don’t thank me.” Lan SiZhui asked. Wen XiaoQiang smiled at him.

“You’re very nice and humble, sir. Ah, now I feel foolish for all the things I’ve said to you on our way here!” He reddened. “I really didn’t mean to talk down on such a kind-hearted cultivator as yourself.”

“Ah, sir, not at all.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I didn’t take it to heart and you’re right anyways. I’m a little naïve and the cultivation Sects truly don’t really help people as much as they could. It’s just, the people who raised me were different, my adoptive father was known for helping wherever he went, even if it was really insignificant. I guess I just got used to his way of doing things and how he taught me to be the same.”

“It is truly a fortune to have met such a good person.” Wen XiaoQiang smiled. “I hope one day when my son grows up he aspires to be like you, sir.”

“Ah, please.” Lan SiZhui blushed. Wen XiaoQiang chuckled, then looked down at the sword once again.

“Ah, this sword used to belong to my father. I’ve never wished to wield it, but A-Chan was different. He always wanted to be a cultivator, so he took father’s sword and joined the main Clan to work under Wen RuoHan. Father died before he learned what had been of him. I remained here and became a healer, just like the rest of the family, although I admit, my talents don’t lay in the needles but in herbs instead.”

“Mn.” Wen Qing confirmed. “XiaoQiang’s herbs are the best quality.”

“I’m glad you think so, A-Qing.” Wen XiaoQiang smiled, though it was somewhat sad. “But unfortunately, the current situation is not good for business.”

“You couldn’t sell anything today either?” Wen Qing frowned and Wen XiaoQiang shook his head, pressing his lips together.

“My basket is full now. I thought I’d leave them here, for A-Ning to practice his brewing techniques on.”

“Mn.” Wen Qing hummed, also looking sad. “Let me get my money pouch.”

“A-Qing, there’s no need for that!” Wen XiaoQiang protested, but Wen Qing cocked an eyebrow.

“Your son will grow and eventually he will want and need things we cannot provide him here. For this, you need money, that’s why you’re still going out to sell your herbs. If you just give it away for free, you’ll never collect enough money for his fulfillment. Stay, I’ll be back in a second.”

With this, she disappeared into the inner room, leaving Lan SiZhui and Wen XiaoQiang alone. Lan SiZhui looked at the man with worry.

“Sir, what you said about the people not wanting to associate with the Wen...”

“Everyone nearby knows who are the Wen living here.” Wen XiaoQiang said sadly. “I’m afraid I’ve been unable to sell my things for a while now, and it will only get worse. I only hope that the Sects will not come for us and take us away as well. My son is still young and I don’t want this to affect his life.”

“Sir, I assure you, if the Sects come, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure they don’t take anyone.” Lan SiZhui promised. Wen XiaoQiang chuckled, smiling at him.

“That’s very good of you sir, but I’m sure you eventually need to return to your home. Don’t get into trouble on our account.”

“Ah, actually—” Lan SiZhui began, but before he could finish, the door opened and Wen Qing stepped in, holding a money pouch that she then tossed to Wen XiaoQiang. Wen XiaoQiang took it with a bittersweet look and Wen Qing, surprisingly smiled at him. Lan SiZhui didn’t see her smile often. It completely transformed her face, bringing out her soft features and making it look more natural.

“Thank you, A-Qing.”

“Mn.” Wen Qing nodded to him. “XiaoQiang, thank you for bringing Lan SiZhui here. I’ll take over from here.”

“Of course, of course.” Wen XiaoQiang bowed, then went to the door. “Thank you, Lan SiZhui, for bringing Feixu back to me.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded to him and smiled. Wen XiaoQiang returned it, then said his goodbyes and exited the building, closing the door behind him. Lan SiZhui turned back to Wen Qing.

“Come.” She said, turning and going into the next room. Lan SiZhui followed her. It was, as Lan SiZhui suspected, a building dedicated for healing. There were several cots set up along the wall, separated from each other by curtains. There was, thankfully, no one on any of them. Wen Ning was mixing something with a spoon in one of the corners, crouching by a little fire. When Lan SiZhui entered, he waved at him, which Lan SiZhui returned. Wen Qing didn’t lead him there, instead she walked all the way to the other end of the room and stopped in front of the last bed. She gestured at it.

“Sit.”

“Ah?” Lan SiZhui was confused, and at his question, Wen Qing rolled her eyes.

“Lan SiZhui, the stories of ChunYu-Jun reached here, too, you know.” She told him deadpan. “I know you were one of the most important figures in the Sunshot Campaign. I’ve also heard you were the one to kill Wen ZhuLiu, and your robes are dirty.” She pointedly cocked an eyebrow and Lan SiZhui flushed red. It wasn’t that he wanted to keep this from her, especially since Lan JingYi told him to seek her out regarding his injuries. He knew he had to see her about this sooner or later, but he felt like he was taking advantage of her kindness if he did it right away as soon as he arrived.

“Wen ZhuLiu injured my meridians.” He admitted. “The healers in Cloud Recesses say it would take a year to heal.”

“I will make my own judgement on that.” She said sternly and gestured to the cot again. Lan SiZhui dropped his bags onto another one and sat on the one she gestured to. She pulled the curtain shut and cocked an eyebrow expectantly, so Lan SiZhui stripped.

She examined him with the cold professionalism he got used to from her. He waited patiently as she poked and prodded him, manipulating his limbs where she wanted them. All the while she didn’t say a word, the only indication of her opinion was in the furrow between her brows.

Lan SiZhui waited anxiously for her judgement on his injuries. He knew Wen Qing was good, and while he never questioned the expertise of the healers in Cloud Recesses, he suspected she was even better than them. He hoped she would be able to offer him better lookouts than a year without his spiritual powers. In the end, she didn’t seem as hopeful as Lan SiZhui hoped for.

“Well, your healers were not wrong, even if their estimate was a little optimist.”

“What do you mean?” Lan SiZhui frowned. Wen Qing looked a little sad to have to share this with him, but despite that she didn’t hesitate to tell him the bad news.

“I’ve seen this technique of Wen ZhuLiu’s before, once. He uses this to cripple his opponents, it is as good as torture for a cultivator. Your meridians are indeed crushed. They

are able to recover, but it will indeed take a long time. For now, every time you use your spiritual powers, you're making the internal injury worse. You need to mediate a lot to heal. Under normal circumstances I'd recommend seclusion and meditation until the year is up. That's how long it will take for your major spiritual veins to recover. After that, you can use your spiritual powers, but only gently, as if you were still a child, learning to cultivate. I would say it will take two years for your powers to recover hundred percent of your spiritual powers, if not longer. It is also not something you can rush."

"So, the healers in Cloud Recesses were wrong?" Lan SiZhui frowned. Wen Qing shook her head.

"Not necessarily. It is true that it will take a year to recover half of your old power. Until then, it is highly discouraged for you to use your spiritual energies at all, but after the major veins are recovered, you can cultivate again."

"I see." Lan SiZhui sighed, disappointed. Earlier, when he first learned he was not to fight for a year, he had been glad about it. Since then, he remembered he had duties that required him to protect his family. Without his spiritual powers, all he had to protect them was his demonic cultivation and almost everyone he knew was against his use of this. It wasn't like he needed their permission to use it, but he would definitely feel better if he didn't end up proving Wen ZhuLiu right.

It seemed he had no choice, however.

"Lan SiZhui, it would be better for your health to go back to the Cloud Recesses and recover there. The positive energies of the mountains will do you better than here." Wen Qing said in an unexpectedly kind and gentle voice.

"I can't do that." Lan SiZhui admitted quietly.

"What do you mean?" Now, this was sharper, more like Wen Qing and for that, Lan SiZhui smiled at her softly.

"It doesn't matter, but... Cousin, can I stay here for a while?"

"How long?" She frowned at him and Lan SiZhui felt his face heat, knowing he'd have to admit this, too.

"For a few weeks maybe?" He asked shyly and Wen Qing's eyes narrowed at this.

"A few weeks?" She asked back strictly. "Lan SiZhui, don't you have responsibilities in your Sect to get back to? GusuLan had been hit hard during the Sunshot Campaign, one would think they need all their disciples home." Lan SiZhui licked his lips, unsure how to answer.

Sure, he could tell the truth, tell Wen Qing he left the Sect, but the woman was not forgiving and she had her own ideas about how the world should be working. Lan SiZhui hardly thought that him leaving GusuLan fit into that picture.



It wasn't that he wanted to lie, but it wouldn't hurt Wen Qing not to know the truth for a little while, just until the Crowd Hunt, then surely, he would tell her. For now, he answered:

"Ah, I've spoken to Sect Leader Lan and he's fine with my... absence." It wasn't a lie, not explicitly. After all, Lan XiChen gave his blessing to Lan SiZhui's leaving, albeit not out of his own decision. Wen Qing seemed to catch on that, her eyes narrowing at him once again, just looking, taking him in. Lan SiZhui tried his hardest not to fidget or seem nervous under the scrutinizing gaze.

"Lan SiZhui, what is it that you're keeping from me?" She asked suspiciously. Thankfully, Wen Ning chose this moment to come seeking them.

"Sister, I'm done with the medicine! Are you finished with Lan SiZhui?" He asked some ways away and Wen Qing didn't answer right away. She kept watching Lan SiZhui, then huffed, turning and pushing the curtain back almost aggressively.

"I'm done with him!" She stated, walking away. "Wen Ning, Lan SiZhui is going to stay with us for a while. Go home and put the guest room in order. Until then he will stay here and meditate. Quietly. Alone." She said pointedly, even though Lan SiZhui didn't even see her anymore. Lan SiZhui knew better than to disobey however, picking up his legs and sitting cross-legged on the bed. From the other side of the room, he heard Wen Ning ask:

"How long will brother Lan stay?"

"How would I know? It's up to him. Hopefully, he will leave soon."

"Ah, but sister, isn't it good to have him here? I'm sure he hasn't been here before. Do you think he would enjoy getting to know the village? After all, we're his family!"

"A-Ning!" She scolded him sternly. "Don't decide things for him. He is a Lan, you know that, too. It is better for him as well if he keeps loyal to the Lan Sect and doesn't bother with the Wen Sect right now. Don't be greedy. Go and put the house in order before we go home for the night. We don't want to receive our guest in your mess, do we?"

"Of course, sister!" Wen Ning sounded enthusiastic and soon the door closed behind him. Soon, the only sounds were Wen Qing tinkering with something in the front of the room, so Lan SiZhui could easily fall into a deep state of meditation. He stayed like that until Wen Qing came to get him, gently shaking his shoulder to bring him out of his meditation. Lan SiZhui blinked his eyes open and looked over at her. She was looking at him expectantly.

"I'm done for the day. Come, you'll sleep in our house."

"Ah, thank you, cousin." Lan SiZhui bowed. She huffed, then turned away, picking something up from the other bed where Lan SiZhui earlier put his bags and put it in front of Lan SiZhui.

"Here. We have more clothes at home, but for now these will do. Your clothes are dirty, I'm sure it's uncomfortable for a Lan." She walked away and Lan SiZhui pulled the curtain closed to dress in the other clothes. He noted they were not the brown ones many people

around here wore, but black instead. He wondered who they belonged to. Once he was done changing his clothes, he picked up his bags and followed Wen Qing out of the building. She only took one look at him, apparently satisfied with his attire, then headed out.

They walked through the village that had become deserted and dark in the meantime. Only a few houses were lit up, indicating some people who stayed up late, but otherwise crickets were heard and stars were seen. It must've been pretty late. Lan SiZhui wondered if this was a normal time for Wen Qing to go home, or it was because of Lan SiZhui that she headed home late.

They soon arrived to a big house near the edge of the village. It seemed more like something Lan SiZhui was used to in other villages than the small houses scattered around the valley. Lan SiZhui remembered that Wen Qing was the Clan Leader's daughter and wondered if that was why she had the biggest house. As they entered the small but tasteful courtyard, Wen Qing led Lan SiZhui to the dining hall, where Wen Ning was just putting hot bowls of soup on the table, hissing as he put a bowl down, picking up his hands and blowing on them. Wen Qing watched on with a growing frown.

"A-Ning, take Lan SiZhui's bags to his bedroom then join us for dinner." She told her brother, who startled a little at her voice.

"Ah, sister, brother Lan, you're here! Of course, sister!" He hurried over and with a goofy grin, took Lan SiZhui's bags, hurrying away with them. Wen Qing took the seat at the end of the table, so Lan SiZhui took one at the side. Soon, Wen Ning joined them, and only then did Wen Qing pick up her spoon. Wen Ning and Lan SiZhui followed her example and soon all three of them were eating the vegetable soup Wen Ning had made them. Feeling like it would be rude not to comment on the other boy's work, Lan SiZhui swallowed and told him:

"Wen Ning, this soup is excellent. Thank you for the trouble."

"Ah, it's really nothing, brother Lan!" Wen Ning beamed at him. "While I was recovering I could do nothing but cook for my sister, even when she told me not to do that, I felt like I needed to."

"Ah, really, I almost forgot to ask, how are you feeling?" Lan SiZhui put down his spoon to pay him proper attention. "Is your back better?"

"Oh, yes!" Wen Ning nodded enthusiastically. "It is much better, brother Lan, thank you for asking! My sister took really good care of me." He smiled warmly and Lan SiZhui shared it with him.

"I'm really glad to hear it, Wen Ning."

"Lan SiZhui, is the soup not to your liking?" Wen Qing suddenly asked. Lan SiZhui looked over, surprised. "Isn't it the Lan Sect's rule not to talk while eating? Are you done with your food then?" Lan SiZhui felt his face heat up.

"Ah, I just didn't want to seem too rude to eat and not ask about Wen Ning." Lan SiZhui said, picking up his spoon. "The soup is great!"

“Then eat, both of you.” She said sternly. “Both of you need your strengths.”

“Yes, sister!”

“Yes, cousin.” Lan SiZhui smiled at her and caught the moment when Wen Qing’s corner of her mouth twitched up, but then she ate some soup and the moment was gone, but Lan SiZhui was sure he saw it. He shared a small look with Wen Ning, then they both returned to their own food.

Once they were finished, Wen Ning put away the dishes, denying any help Lan SiZhui offered him. Wen Qing looked at Lan SiZhui, as if he was supposed to expect that Wen Ning wouldn’t let him help, but still. In the meantime, Lan SiZhui took advantage of Wen Ning being away to ask:

“Ah, cousin, is Wen Ning telling truth? Is he truly better?”

“Much.” Wen Qing nodded sternly. “I take care of my family.” She threw him a pointed look and Lan SiZhui felt his face heat.

“Ah, I didn’t mean to suggest I don’t think you—” He saw it on her face right away that was not the source of her displeasure.

“I know.” She sighed and checked if Wen Ning was still gone to say: “He has scars. It will take some time until they stop bothering him. Generally speaking, that is normal. He has nightmares, but he is otherwise the same. This is also expected. He is stronger than he looks. He will be completely fine once this nightmare with the Sects is over.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Wen Qing was studying him closely for some reason, but Lan SiZhui quickly changed the topic.

“And you?”

“What about me?” Her eyes flashed threateningly, but Lan SiZhui wasn’t easily intimidated.

“How are you faring after... All of that?”

“I’m fine.” She snapped and Lan SiZhui smiled at her.

“It’s fine if you’re not.” Lan SiZhui said melancholically. “I certainly wouldn’t be if it happened to my brother. I certainly wouldn’t forgive myself so easily.” He said with a sad smile, looking at the table.

“Are you suggesting this was my fault?” Wen Qing asked sharply and Lan SiZhui looked over, horrified.

“Not at all!” He was quick to deny. “I didn’t mean—I meant, myself. If I were you, I wouldn’t forgive me for what I’ve put the two of you through. I was arrogant and got you and Wen Ning in trouble, and—”

“What are you talking about?” She cut him off with a tone Lan SiZhui couldn’t place. Sarcasm? Dismissal? “Do you think A-Ning blames you for what happened? Do you think I

blame you?” She asked sharply and Lan SiZhui looked up, eyes wide. Wen Qing wasn’t looking at him, but at the door instead. “You might’ve been the subject of this... incident, but you weren’t the reason. I told A-Ning to stay in the supervisory office. That he decided not to listen to me is his own fault. That he was dumb enough to get caught is also on him. That he’d been punished like this is Wen Chao’s and his men’s fault. Wen Chao is dead and I suspect all others who were present also are, or are captured. Justice had been served. You have no reason to feel guilty about anything regarding this.”

“But I went to you back then. And then I made that deal with Wen Chao and didn’t fulfil my part, which almost got both of you killed.”

“We can take care of ourselves and we have our own thoughts. Do you think if I truly didn’t want you there, I couldn’t have figured out a way to send you away? And your deal with Wen Chao, A-Ning told me all about it, what could you have possibly done differently? Sell out Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu? You’re a Lan. I am not one to entertain surreal ideas. And how could you have kept yourself to that stupid deal? Wen Chao deliberately made it so it was impossible to keep. Do you think he had any intention keeping A-Ning alive even if you returned from the Burial Mounds? How could you even have, with the way you were? By all means you shouldn’t even be *alive* right now.”

At her monologue, Lan SiZhui was speechless. He never would’ve guessed this was what Wen Qing thought. The woman stood now, abruptly.

“Lan SiZhui, I am used to dumb boys saying dumb things. But so far, I believed you were different. You’re Lan SiZhui. Be better than this nonsense.” She told him sharply. “Come, I’ll show you to your room.” With this, she exited the room, without waiting for Lan SiZhui to catch up. He quickly stood and poked his head into the kitchen where Wen Ning was just picking up a tray of tea.

“Ah, Wen Ning, I think your sister is done with me for the night.” Wen Ning looked at him with wide eyes. “Sorry, but I’ll be retiring to my rooms now.”

“Ah, that’s fine, brother Lan!” Wen Ning said, not looking disappointed, which reassured Lan SiZhui. “We will see each other tomorrow, right?”

“Ah, I don’t know.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “But I’ll be looking for you.” He smiled and Wen Ning returned it.

“In that case, good night, brother Lan!”

“Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui reminded him and Wen Ning turned red.

“Lan SiZhui.” He stuttered, then bowed with the tray. “Good night.”

“Good night, Wen Ning.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him, then turned to leave the room. Wen Qing was waiting outside, her back to the door, she appeared to be admiring the sky. When Lan SiZhui stepped out, she began walking without looking back. Lan SiZhui followed her to a side room.

It was nice. Nicer than he expected, based on what he saw of the village so far. The room was simply decorated. There was a low table in the middle of the room and a privacy screen to the side, hiding the bed from view. Lan SiZhui's bags had been carefully placed on a high chair to the side.

"I hope this room will suit your needs. This is the only guest room we have." Wen Qing said from outside. Lan SiZhui turned and smiled at her gratefully.

"It is perfect. Thank you." Wen Qing just nodded, her face devoid of all emotion.

"Tomorrow I expect you to rest and not disturb anyone. You know where the kitchens are. We don't have any servants, so I'm afraid you'll have to take care of yourself on your own. If you don't know how to cook, go to Granny. If you ask anyone on the street, they will know where she is and will point you there. Tell her I sent you to have a meal."

"Thank you." Lan SiZhui repeated with a bow.

"Good night, Lan SiZhui." Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked away.

"Good night, Wen Qing." Lan SiZhui called after her, still bowing. Once she disappeared in the dark, Lan SiZhui pulled his door closed and looked around the room. It was really nice.

There was an incense burner on the table and Lan SiZhui lit it, curious about the smell of it before going over to his bags to unpack. He truly didn't have a lot of things. Most of his rations he got from Lan XiChen he ate during his trip here. Now his second pack only contained usual things a disciple would take night-hunting. Lan SiZhui didn't particularly care for these rules, but he knew if a member of the Sect withdrew from the Sect on his own, he was to receive a common package most disciples took to night-hunt, in order to help with settling down – some money, some food, talismans, signal flares and such. Lan SiZhui never had to witness such occasion, but being the head disciple, he had to know these things, in order to aid the current or future Sect Leader's job.

In his other pack he had his clothes and other necessities he brought from Cloud Recesses, also not much. He put the remaining contents of his second pack, the talismans and such on a shelf, while he folded his clothes and put them in a cupboard that was already filled with strange clothes – some grey, some red, some curiously blue. He put his other necessities to their places, then put Yingjiu into the sword holder provided to him, but there was no guqin stand, so he put Hudie on the low table.

With his qiankun pouch, however, another thing fell out of his clothes and he picked up the little bundle wrapped in blue paper and remembered Lan JingYi pushing it into his hand before he got on the boat. He went over and sat on the bed, cradling the soft bundle in his lap. It wasn't big, nor heavy. It felt feather-light and Lan SiZhui wondered about the contents before he realized he could actually open it now, so he did.

He carefully peeled the sides of the paper off, revealing light blue cloth that he then also pulled away. He watched the cloth fall away, but could hardly do any more. His fingers trembled as he gently touched the material.

*“A reminder that I hope you’ll consider very carefully.”* Lan JingYi had said.

Lan SiZhui took the ribbon out of the cloth it was wrapped into, caressing it with his thumb. Lan XiChen was right earlier, for the ribbon at this point was more brown than white. There were darker patches, where the blood clearly seeped too deep into the fabric.

*A reminder.* He wrapped the ribbon, his old forehead ribbon tightly around his wrist and curled up on the bed, playing with it as he lay there. Soon, sleep took him, his dreams bringing memories alive, old ones from when he was still a child with Lan JingYi.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Wen man (birthname) : (温)新 (Wēn) Xīn: “new”

Wen man (courtesy): (温)晓强 (Wēn) XiǎoQiáng: Xiǎo: "dawn" Qiáng:  
"surname/strong/powerful"

# Perception III.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan SiZhui did not know what to do with himself. It was not often that he was left to his own devices, and even then, he was mostly in Cloud Recesses, or at least in the company of his friends, who had their own ideas about occupying themselves. Lan SiZhui was not good at that. If he had nothing to do and no one to be with, he was helping out around Cloud Recesses, meditating or learning or just reading for fun.

On his first few days at Dafan Mountain, he entertained himself with books he found in the guest rooms – they were poetry books and two novels Lan SiZhui haven't heard of before – and meditating as per Wen Qing's orders, but even he couldn't meditate forever, unless he went into seclusion, which he had no desire to do so here.

Lan SiZhui was... bored. It wasn't a feeling he was overly familiar with, Lan SiZhui wasn't a person hard to entertain. Give him a book and tell him to meditate and he was fine, but after days of doing that with little to no human interaction and he began to understand why Lan JingYi often complained about having nothing to do even though they were at the library or were to meditate.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning left early, always with Wen Qing's warning that he was to rest and meditate throughout the day. Lan SiZhui didn't mind that, but there was only so many hours of the day he could meditate before getting restless, and so he was feeling a little left out.

A few days into his stay, he'd decided to take a walk around the village. Even though Wen Qing asked him to stay, she never explicitly forbid him from going out. He ate breakfast with the Wen siblings, then retired to his rooms to meditate. Once he was done with that, he got up and exited his rooms. The courtyard was nice, though he could tell the Wen didn't have any servants. Lan SiZhui didn't mind that, turning to exit the house instead.

The village was still too closely packed and there were several people milling about on the streets. It seemed like many people, just like Lan SiZhui himself, had nothing better to do than household chores and bothering others – though Lan SiZhui suspected from the way their advances were received, that it was less of a bother and more welcome.

He observed the village, the people living in it and tried to remember if he knew these people. He knew the Wen remnants in his time were made of more than just the population of his village, or at least suspected it. This was why, again, Lan SiZhui wished they were in the future. How much easier would it be to just ask one of his seniors about these times, or look this up in a book – although with how the cultivation world handled the Wen Sect, Lan SiZhui doubted any such recordings remained.

He was getting looks as he was walking around, but Lan SiZhui wasn't bothered. After all, he came here unannounced, if not uninvited, and there was a high tension between the Wen and the rest of the world. He smiled at the people he passed, hoping to appear less threatening.

Some people smiled back and inclined their heads in greeting – to those, Lan SiZhui bowed, but didn't stop to bother them. After a while he reached the end of the village and turned to go another direction. He did this until there was nowhere else to go and he looked around, trying to see where he could go back.

Just at that moment a shout cut through the relative quietness of the part of the village where Lan SiZhui was. Immediately, he reached towards his qiankun pouch where he stored Hudie. Before he pulled it out, he looked around, trying to determine where the sound came from and concluded the house to his right, right at the edge of the village. He leapt up and entered the courtyard, looking around frantically for the source of the loud noise. He needn't to guess, for the next moment there was another loud call coming from his left. He rushed inside whatever room it was.

The scene that greeted him was nothing like he expected. The shout must've come from the woman, who was sitting on a table, holding something to her chest that was also letting out loud sounds. Before Lan SiZhui could really take it all in, the woman saw him and then pointed at the floor.

"The snake was right here! I can't see it anymore!" Lan SiZhui felt a bit foolish. He was expecting a demon, a monster or something like this. He immediately felt foolish for being disappointed not a bigger threat awaited him. This woman was frightened and even if this was just a snake, it was within Lan SiZhui's power to help, so he was going to do just that. As he looked around, the woman spoke again: "My father said if they have flat heads they're venomous. Be careful!"

"Ah, I think it's more in the shape of the head." Lan SiZhui answered calmly, even as he crouched to look under the table. "My father said if they have triangular heads, they're venomous."

"I haven't seen its head, I just saw it and jumped up!" The woman cried. Lan SiZhui realized then that the other noise in the room was a baby crying as well. Together the two noises grated on his ears, but he ignored it as he saw the end of a green tail slithering behind a basket on the other side of the table. He jumped up and turned towards the woman.

"It didn't bite you or the child?"

"No." The woman shook her head vehemently. Lan SiZhui nodded, relieved.

"I think I know what this is. My cousin, Jin Ling told me about them before. The Jin call them bamboo snakes, they aren't deadly, but their bite is incredibly painful. Do you have a broom?"

"Over there." The woman pointed towards the wall behind Lan SiZhui, who turned and picked the broom up. He carefully approached the basket, the woman watching, still holding her baby to her chest. The child had become quiet as well.

They watched as Lan SiZhui reached out with the broom, then tilted the basket a little before letting it fall back onto its bottom. He did not see the snake, so he moved the basket. There it was, curled up in a defensive pose, neck coiled, ready to strike. Lan SiZhui considered his



options. He looked into the basket, seeing only some sad, soggy greens at the very bottom of it, but nothing else – not even a hole. He then turned the broom so the handle was towards the snake. He reached under one of its coils and found it easy to lift the snake up – it was not particularly big. The snake hissed at him as he lifted it into the basket, but it did not put up a fight – it was most likely just as scared as its hosts were. Lan SiZhui found the top of the basket and put it on quickly.

As soon as he was done with this, Lan SiZhui turned back to the woman. Before he could speak, however, suddenly three men barged inside, one of them holding a sword up, unsheathed. They looked to be the woman's age, who was somewhat older than Lan SiZhui, her baby indicating how old she must've been. They wore the same kind of clothes Lan SiZhui saw around the village, and he thought he might've even seen the three of them in the village before. They looked around, saw the woman, then the one with the sword spotted Lan SiZhui. His eyes widened and his grip on his sword tightened.

“Stop there!” He cried, stepping forward, pointing at Lan SiZhui, who was frozen on the spot. “How dare you!” The man demanded with rage on his face. The others also turned towards him, determination coloring their faces.

“Ah, sir, it’s...” Lan SiZhui began, but before he could explain the situation, the woman cut him off.

“A-Su!” She said in a stern tone. “You don’t even know what happened, yet you’re so quick to jump to conclusions! Don’t you even want to ask?” Her outburst surprised Lan SiZhui in its vehemence and it seemed the men were just as taken aback. Perhaps the woman hadn’t been this passionate often, but the scare must’ve ruffled her temper as well. Lan SiZhui understood - if he had a child to protect, he would also have a short temper, he supposed.

“Ah... A-Fei, what was I supposed to think?” The man stuttered, caught off guard. “Your neighbors said they heard a scream coming from here, and then I find you with a strange man in your kitchen, your face pale and your child crying.” He exclaimed, pointing at Lan SiZhui again.

“And if you asked me I’d have been able to tell you there was a snake in my kitchen and that this kind young man just appeared and caught the snake.” She glared at him for a long time, until the man swallowed and bowed his head, then she turned to Lan SiZhui. “Sir, thank you so much for the help! How were you able to come so quickly?” Her tone only spoke of honest curiosity, none of the man's, A-Su's accusation in them, though Lan SiZhui would've understood that as well.

“Ah, I was walking around here and heard your cry.” He said. “Sorry for barging in.” He bowed apologetically.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue then!” The woman smiled. She didn't seem mad. Lan SiZhui was relieved.

“Ah, A-Fei, is everything alright then? Did the snake bite you or your child?” A-Su asked again, ignoring Lan SiZhui after throwing him a suspicious look.

"No, not at all." The woman said, her temper settled. "I just got frightened, that's all." She shook her head, handing the child over to one of the men so she could climb down from the table. Once she was down, she took the child back. She turned to Lan SiZhui. "Sir, my name is Hao YiFei." She bowed as much as she could with her child still in her hand. Lan SiZhui returned the bow.

"My name is Lan SiZhui, Madam Hao."

"Lan SiZhui? Ah, are you the mister Lan my husband brought here a few days ago?" She wondered aloud. Lan SiZhui shrugged. He suspected this meant Hao YiFei's husband was Wen XiaoQiang, who also said he just became a father, but he didn't want to assume.

"He is, A-Fei. He lives with A-Qing and A-Ning now, he is their guest." A-Su answered in his stead and Lan SiZhui felt grateful he was there to clear that up.

"Of course he is, A-Su." Madam Hao rolled her eyes, though it felt affectionate, like an older sister placating her younger brother. "He is a cultivator and nobody else have had a chance to make friends with the Lan."

"I wouldn't say we are friends." Lan SiZhui corrected her. When the four looked at him skeptically, Lan SiZhui felt his face heat. "Ah, I am also a Wen by birth, Madam Hao. I was taken in by the Lan when I was very young and I've been raised as one for all my life. I had a high fever when they took me in, so I don't remember much from before – because of this, until about two years ago I wasn't even aware of my heritage." He explained. "However, I remember Wen Qing and Wen Ning being my cousins from before. I wouldn't say we are friends, more like lost family."

"So, then, who are your parents?" One of the men asked. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"I never knew, or if I did, I forgot. I must have been very young when I lost them, because I don't remember them at all."

"I see." The man hummed thoughtfully.

"A-Su, Tao Jun, A-Ji, go now. Since everything is alright, I thank you for your concern, but there's no reason for you to stay." Madam Hao said.

"A-Fei, we're glad you and the little one are fine." A-Su said, sheathing his sword, then he bowed to Lan SiZhui. "Sir, so sorry for unsheathing my weapon on you."

"It's fine! It was just a misunderstanding." Lan SiZhui smiled and the other man bowed two more times before the three of them left. Madam Hao then turned to Lan SiZhui. Before she said anything, her gaze caught on something behind Lan SiZhui and she paused.

"Ah, mister Lan, what should we do about that snake?" She asked, holding her child closer to her chest. Lan SiZhui glanced back at the basket, then around the room they were in and hummed.

“Madam Hao, the snake is innocent. It must’ve gotten in trying to find mice and whatnot that might live in your food supplies, so it is not its fault it came in. Ah, do you know a place that is far enough we can walk to, where we could release it?”

“This snake eats mice then?” Madam Hao asked, surprised. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“According to my cousin, they eat birds and small animals like mice and rats.” He remembered foggily having a discussion about this with Jin Ling, although he didn’t remember when exactly they had it and what led to it. Still he was glad to have learned this and having this information now. He made a mental note that once everything settled, make sure Jin Ling knew he appreciated his knowledge and spend more time studying together.

“Then, I think I know where we should take it. I was planning on taking a walk with the child anyways.” She smiled and Lan SiZhui returned it with a nod, pleased she was not mad and even offered to accompany him. He wasn’t sure he would do well if she just gave him directions.

Madam Hao ran to her rooms to retrieve a warmer blanket for the baby while Lan SiZhui brought the basket with the snake inside out of the house. They met in front, then Madam Hao lead Lan SiZhui through the village. On their way, they didn’t meet many people, only a few of those they did even stopped them to ask about the child’s health. Hao YiFei assured everyone that he was fine and healthy.

Once they were away from the busiest parts of the village, Lan SiZhui asked:

“Does he have a name?” Lan SiZhui didn’t know much about babies, much less about the habit of naming them. He had rarely been around babies, occasionally on night-hunts, and even then, he didn’t pay much attention to them.

“Ah, not yet.” She smiled sadly, cradling the child’s head to her shoulder where it rested. “Usually children are named on their one-month celebration, but my child is often sick. He had just recovered from a fever actually. I am cautious about naming him just yet.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui said, surprised at hearing this and wondering why did they only name children on their one-month celebration. Was Lan SiZhui named the same way? Was Lan JingYi? Was Jin Ling? “Forgive my ignorance.”

“Ah, I’m sure it’s different with gentry children.” She smiled. Lan SiZhui felt his face heat at that.

“I wouldn’t know.” He admitted. It felt a little bad admitting his shortcoming, but he made a mental note that once he had access to some outside information, he would look this all up. Not that he planned on having a child to name, but this seemed like something a person of humble origins should know about. Lan SiZhui wondered why he never learned about this, but then again, the Lan were not the most open about the heart's matters.

“Don’t you have a sweetheart yet, mister Lan?” Madam Hao asked, sounding surprised. “Ah, but surely, such a handsome young man must have girls proposing marriage left and right!” Lan SiZhui felt even more embarrassed at that.

“I don’t, Madam Hao. I’m concentrating on my cultivation and anyways, with the war and all, it is not a good time for me to think about such matters.”

“Right, right, forgive me for being noisy!” She laughed. “Look at me, my little one isn’t even in his first year and I’m already acting like a grandmother to someone else’s child.” She chuckled self-consciously. Lan SiZhui smiled at her, telling her he didn’t mind. He truly didn’t. He never really had anyone to tease him about such matters - his peers at Cloud Recesses were too respectful to comment on such matters. The closest he had been to it had been when Jin Ling teased Lan JingYi about the same thing, but even that was directed at his friend and not at Lan SiZhui himself.

They slowly reached the forest around the village. Lan SiZhui was too deep in thought and conversation to notice when they left the walls of the village. Now he looked around, enjoying the view. It was slightly different than the one he came on. This path was less walked on, weaving between the trees. He half-expected coming across wild animals this far out of civilization. In the Cloud Recesses the Sect's home was, as respectful of nature and timid in personality they were, too close to wilderness for wild animals to appear often. When he walked the mountains of Cloud Recesses, he never expected to come across an animal. Here, who knew. They did just catch a snake in the kitchen.

Lan SiZhui enjoyed this aimless stroll through the forest. It wasn't often he got to just walk around without any real purpose or a task to perform - well, he supposed the place where they would let the snake go was their destination and releasing it was his task. Still, it felt like such a small deal. A snake was just a snake, not a resentful beast they needed to hunt down, subdue and fight.

He was shaken out of his thoughts when Madam Hao commented: “We’re almost there, mister Lan.” Lan SiZhui paid closer attention to their surroundings from there on, gazing around curiously, wanting to see what spot the woman choose for the little green snake on Lan SiZhui's back.

Sure enough, a couple of minutes later they got out of the forest and Lan SiZhui froze at the sight in front of him. He was standing at the edge of a sea of blood – no, that wasn’t right... It was a field, a field soaked in blood, the blades of grass swaying gently in the subtle wind, its red tips creating the effect of waves of a sea. Lan SiZhui stared into the field and he was horrified.

“What happened here?!” He asked, eyes wide as he looked to the woman. She was calm, more so, she seemed to be confused by his shaky voice.

“Nothing, what... Ah!” She looked out into the field, then towards Lan SiZhui. “Mister Lan, you’ve never seen this type of grass before, have you? It’s alright, this isn’t blood!” She reassured him with a smirk. “Sir, this is called blood grass! It grows red like this, giving the illusion of the field being covered in blood, but it is not blood at all, just the color of the grass.”

“Ah?” Lan SiZhui looked around again, but his vision couldn’t tell the difference.

“Here, look!” She picked up a blade of grass, holding it up to Lan SiZhui to see. As he examined it closer, he saw that indeed the leaf was growing red almost from the root with only a little green to show. It was completely dry and as much as Lan SiZhui rubbed it, the color did not come off. “It’s harmless.” Madam Hao said, then made a face. “Ah, no, actually, that’s not completely true. It is highly invasive, so in the village we constantly have to pluck it out so it doesn’t ruin our crops. But other than that, it is harmless. Just a type of grass that grows around here. My husband says it is because of some old wars that it got here and it is not actually supposed to grow in our land.”

“I see...” Lan SiZhui murmured, crouching to touch more of the grass.

“I think it’s pretty, but he doesn’t like it because it overtakes his herb garden.” Madam Hao kept chatting. “It’s the same with butterflies; I like them because they’re pretty, but my husband says their caterpillars ruin the herbs.”

“I like butterflies too.” Lan SiZhui smiled up at her and she laughed, delighted. She was very pretty in this lighting. Tired looking, but very beautiful. Lan SiZhui stood, took off the basket and put it on the ground. Madam Hao shuffled back. “It’s best if we don’t linger after I let it go.” Lan SiZhui said and she nodded. Lan SiZhui turned the basket on its side, then pulled off the top. He waited, but the snake did not come out right away. After a few minutes of waiting, he shook the basket a little. At this, the snake darted out and disappeared into the blood-red field. Lan SiZhui took one last look inside the basket, just to make sure the snake was gone, then picked it up and turned to Madam Hao.

"It is going to find a nice home now. Hopefully it won't come back."

"Ah, sir, now that I've seen it, I have no doubt that you and the Wen are related." She said with a fond smile. Lan SiZhui made a questioning noise. "You have just as gentle of a soul as they do." She paused then looked out into the field, adjusting her slumbering child on her shoulder. "This is why I am so afraid of the Sects coming for us. This village is full of people who would never hurt a soul, yet the Sects see us as threat, just because of the blood running through our veins."

"The Sects made a pact after the final battle." Lan SiZhui commented quietly. "They would not harm any civilians and every cultivator would have a fair trial before being punished. I believe they would not go back on their word." Madam Hao didn't answer for a long time, then she sighed and smiled at Lan SiZhui.

"Let us go back." Was all she said. Together they waked back to the village, not in a hurry at all. Lan SiZhui felt he was not successful in placating Hao YiFei's fears, but he wasn't sure what else he could do. Madam Hao didn't seem troubled by this at all, humming quietly when her child stirred, walking at a comfortable pace. After a while, she began a conversation once again.

“My husband, he said you are the one who brought back Wen ChanYu’s sword.” The topic didn't caught Lan SiZhui completely off guard. He suspected she was going to bring it up sooner or later.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I thank you for this. My husband doesn’t have many things from his family left, most of it had been damaged or lost during the attack a few years ago, when A-Qing and A-Ning lost their parents. It is good that now my child will also have something from his ancestors.”

“Feixu is a fine weapon. It did good service to me. I believe your child will also make good use of it.”

“I am glad.” She smiled. “This means my child will receive a worthy weapon. Though I never wanted him to take up the path of the sword, it is good that if he decides to do so, he will have a family sword.”

“You intend for him to become a healer as well?” Lan SiZhui inquired.

“If he chooses. In reality, both me and my husband had this choice. I also come from a family of cultivators, as does he. We both choose to become healers, and while my path took me to treating people, he is better with growing and caring for herbs. We could’ve become cultivators but we both decided not to. We want our children to have this choice as well.”

“That’s good.” Lan SiZhui smiled. He didn’t remember having this choice. Once he was in the Cloud Recesses, he thought it was simply expected of him to cultivate, especially as Hanguang-Jun’s ward. Lan SiZhui didn’t mind this. He thought if he had been given the choice, he would’ve also chose this path. His adoptive father was a worthy figure to look up to, and besides, Lan SiZhui would do anything to protect those he loved.

“Of course, cultivation is a very good choice as well. But today, you see how the cultivation world is and it’s hard to subject a child to this. Before the war, we imagined if our children decided to become cultivators, they would be going to my Clan to train and not to the Wen, even though that is my husband’s Sect.”

Lan SiZhui figured that was the smart choice to make, even before the war. There were, of course, many fine cultivators the Wen Sect had to offer to the world, although Lan SiZhui didn’t have the chance to learn much about them. But those who gained a name to themselves all became well-known. Still, the Wen’s reputation had not been the finest for a long time before the war. Lan SiZhui figured if he was in similar situation, he would’ve also chose another Sect.

“Now, after the war, we do not even know if he will see the next day.” She said with a sigh and a sad smile.

“I will make sure he is protected.” Lan SiZhui told her and she laughed.

“Mister Lan, it is not your job. It is ours, even if we have to give our lives for this.” She said with a laugh, but Lan SiZhui didn’t find this funny at all.

“Madam Hao. I grew up without ever knowing my birthparents, and even though I had a good life with my adoptive family, I wish things didn’t turn out this way. Please, don’t say that.”

“Of course, I don’t want to die.” Madam Hao shook her head. “But I will do anything to protect my child. That is my job as his parent.” She smiled.

Soon, they arrived to the village and any further conversation stopped as they went through, greeting the same people once again, stopping to chat with them again. Once they’ve reached the woman’s home, Lan SiZhui took off the basket and leaned it against a wall in the courtyard. He didn’t want to barge into the woman’s home, even if he was invited this time around.

“Thank you again for the help, mister Lan.” Hao YiFei bowed to him once he was ready to depart. Lan SiZhui returned it.

“Thank you for walking with me to the field – you could have just told me where I find it, but you came with me.”

“You would’ve gotten lost otherwise.” Madam Hao shrugged her shoulders, jostling the baby that’s fallen asleep in the meantime. The child let out a displeased sound, but otherwise didn’t make a fuss. He looked around with huge brown eyes, settling them on Lan SiZhui. As their gazes met, Lan SiZhui thought this gaze was familiar. For a long time, he looked at the baby who looked back at him, chewing on his little fist. “It is time for me to feed him, if you forgive me mister Lan.” Madam Hao said and Lan SiZhui shook himself out of it, nodding to her and bowing once again.

“I hope no more trouble finds you or your husband, Madam Hao.”

“I hope you enjoy your stay here, mister Lan.” Madam Hao smiled at him. With this, it was time for Lan SiZhui to go.

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Lan JingYi promised they would write each other often and regularly. It was plenty days into his stay that Lan SiZhui thought of sending a letter to them, and he felt a little bad about not sending one earlier. He didn’t want to wait this long to send his own letter and he hoped his friends didn’t take offense in his delay. It was just, he expected his friends to send letters with a courier and figured he would pay the messenger to wait for his reply then have them delivered right away. But as time went by he didn’t receive any messages and Lan SiZhui began to feel anxious about it. He decided to take matters into his own hands, see if everything was alright.

Since the Wen village was secluded, Lan SiZhui had no idea who to give the letters. If he was in a proper town he would go to an official’s building and ask around for couriers. He would receive one within minutes. Here, he didn’t even know who to ask, so he asked the Wen siblings.

“We used to have a courier, but he got too old for the job.” Wen Qing told him as they were sipping tea after dinner. “Nowadays if we have a message to send or expecting one, we go to Buddha’s Feet. A courier there brings and takes mail, though we don’t really use their services much. I think some of those who married into the Clan do, certainly Hao YiFei and

Tao Jun do. Usually Hao YiFei just gives the mail to her husband, since he goes to town daily, but Tao Jun goes sometimes as well.”

“If you give me the letter, I can also take it there.” Wen Ning said. Lan SiZhui was about to protest when Wen Qing shook her head.

“There’s no need. I will introduce you to Tao Jun, since he is easier to catch during the day, you don’t have to wait until night or wake up early as you would have with XiaoQiang.”

“That would be great, I am grateful.” Lan SiZhui smiled and nodded. Wen Qing just inclined her head at this.

The next day Wen Qing left with Wen Ning as per usual, then sometime before lunch, Wen Ning appeared in the house, looking for Lan SiZhui.

“Ah, Wen Ning, how come you’re home so early?” Lan SiZhui asked. Wen Ning shook his head.

“I’m just running some errands for my sister. She said to fetch you and find Tao Jun, would you like to?” Lan SiZhui immediately jumped up from the lotus position he had been meditating in.

“Yes!” He exclaimed, excited. “Should I bring the letters?”

“Mn.” Wen Ning nodded, so Lan SiZhui hurried into his room and fetched it. Once he had it, they left.

“Would Tao Jun bring back letters as well?” He asked and Wen Ning nodded.

“He usually does. They store the letters in an official’s building in Buddha’s Feet, so we can pick it up anytime. They usually collect all letters that come here together, so we take it back and distribute them.”

“You mustn’t get urgent letters often.” Lan SiZhui wondered and Wen Ning shrugged.

“There are not many emergencies we need to tend to. Sometimes a family member dies and the person whose family it is has to hurry to arrive within the mourning period, but it’s not that bad. Everyone we’re in contact with knows we are secluded.”

“Have you never wanted another courier after the previous one retired?”

“Of course.” Wen Ning huffed. “But nobody here wants to become one and we don’t have enough money to hire one. Those who come to Buddha’s Feet aren’t willing to come out this far, unless they’re paid a lot of money, and right now it is even trickier, since everyone is so cautious contacting the Wen.”

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui sighed, feeling bad for these people. Mail amongst commoners had always been slow, Lan SiZhui knew this. It wasn’t like he was ignorant just because cultivators could use spiritual energy to send messages faster than a courier could carry them. They also sometimes used regular means to send messages, though oftentimes it was purely because of



the distance from the receiver and the cultivator paid a lot of money to get their letter to the person they intend it to go to faster. He didn't think the situation could get this dire.

"Ah, Tao Jun!" Wen Ning suddenly exclaimed and Lan SiZhui perked up, looking around. He saw a young man turning around to look at them. He was short and thin, with short hair and a topknot. He was young and kind-faced.

"Wen Ning, what can I do for you?" He asked right away, seeing Wen Ning jog to catch up. Wen Ning bowed to him, so did Lan SiZhui.

"Tao Jun, this is my cousin, Lan SiZhui. He would like to contact his home and friends, we hoped you would be so kind and help him out."

"Ah, if I can, certainly." Tao Jun nodded, smiling at Lan SiZhui, who returned it.

"Sir, I have two letters written for my friends. I would like to ask you to bring them to the courier at Buddha's Feet."

"That is no problem at all." The man nodded, holding out his hand. "May I see the letters?" Lan SiZhui pulled them out of his robes and handed them over. They were each wrapped in paper from Gusu, since that was the only paper Lan SiZhui had on him. He could've asked the Wen for some, but he felt if he had some on him, why ask for more? The man took a look at each, then asked: "Where should I send them?"

The two letters were almost identical. One of them was a little heavier and a little thicker, since it included two papers instead of one, like the other.

"The big one to Cloud Recesses, the smaller to Qiongqi Path. Ah, here." Lan SiZhui reached into his sleeves and pulled out his money pouch, selecting what he assumed was enough money to make the journey. Tao Jun took the money, then raised his eyebrows before sliding them into his own robes.

"Sir, I will make sure these letters reach their destination for sure." He said with a bow and Lan SiZhui beamed at him.

"Ah, one more thing, sir." Lan SiZhui remembered. "My friends have most likely sent me letters. One should be in golden paper with the Jin Sect's insignia on it, the other in paper like this, with the Lan Sect's insignia. Could you check if the courier brought anything like that and bring it to me?" He asked hopefully, then he remembered: "Ah, here." He handed over some more silver to the man.

"I'll make sure your letters also arrive here, sir." Tao Jun beamed and bowed to him again. Lan SiZhui bowed him too.

"Thank you, sir, I really appreciate your help!"

"Not a problem, not a problem!" Tao Jun denied, then they said their goodbyes.



Lan SiZhui only heard back from Tao Jun a day and half later. The young man actually went to the Wen siblings' house in order to talk to him. Fortunately, Lan SiZhui was there, meditating as per Wen Qing's request, when he heard the knock on the door. He quickly got up and went to answer it, his mood brightening as soon as he saw Tao Jun.

"Sir, please, come in. Would you like some tea?" Lan SiZhui offered, but Tao Jun quickly denied with a hand held up and a mild smile.

"Sir, I have to go back to work soon, but I wanted to talk to you. I've gone to Buddha's Feet to give your mail to the courier. Unfortunately, there was none waiting for you at the official's building, but your letters had been sent. They should arrive in a few days."

"Oh." Lan SiZhui blinked at him. They exchanged a few more words, thought Lan SiZhui wouldn't be able to tell what, and soon Tao Jun was saying goodbye and Lan SiZhui closed the door behind him.

It really wasn't that he was worried. Most likely Lan JingYi was busy and Jin Ling might not answer at all. Lan SiZhui didn't dare to think something was wrong. Although Lan JingYi promised to write often, he was not one to forget his promised easily. Maybe he was waiting for Lan SiZhui's letter before sending one of his own, much like Lan SiZhui had waited for his. Maybe he didn't know where to send his letters. Maybe they got lost. There was no reason to worry too much.



Even after his ran-in with the snake and Hao YiFei, Lan SiZhui's status in the Wen village remained pretty secluded. While he was with the woman he talked to some people but no one he would bother without feeling bad. There was still nothing to do for Lan SiZhui in the village, and no more snakes poked their heads out. He wanted something to do, needed to, actually, something useful, but he was unsure how he should approach the subject. When he brought it up with Wen Qing, it didn't go well.

"Wen Qing," he began one day after dinner. Wen Qing looked up from her tea, cocking a curious eyebrow at him. Wen Ning next to them also looked up, looking nervously between them. "You and Wen Ning leave every day to work. Is there something I could help with?"

"You want to help with medicine?" Wen Qing cocked an eyebrow and Lan SiZhui shrugged. "You are not qualified." Wen Qing told him and Lan SiZhui felt bad for being shut down so quickly.

"Ah, but there must be something for me to do here?" He asked, looking around. "I could... Clean?"

"The place isn't clean enough for you?" Wen Qing huffed, annoyed. She was right though. The place was immaculate, the Wen always cleaned up after themselves. Lan SiZhui thought what else he could do, but there was very little he could help with around the house. He could cook just fine, learned from his night hunts when they were in the wilderness and he had to make food for his mates and him, but that was neither high quality, nor... any good, really. They would eat it, since there was nothing else around, but it was not the most enjoyable.

“I feel useless.” Lan SiZhui confessed quietly. Added in with the slight concern he felt about Lan JingYi and Jin Ling not answering his letters, he felt jittery and antsy.

“You are.” Wen Qing told him matter-of-factly. Wen Ning looked startled at that. “Since you are, you could go back home, meditate in seclusion, gain back your spiritual powers, heal up, once you did that, you won’t be useless anymore.” She told him.

Lan SiZhui didn’t often take things to heart people told him, nor did he often get angry at others for saying something to him – even when Jin Ling called him ‘Wen dog’ he felt more sad than angry. Wen Chao’s actions often brought anger out of him, but those, he felt, did not count. Last time he got mad at someone about commenting on his person had been when Wen ZhuLiu spoke to him about his demonic cultivation.

“Cultivation is not the only thing I can do.” He argued, even though he was the one to say he was useless. Wen Qing huffed.

“What can you do then, besides cultivation?” She asked arrogantly. Lan SiZhui deflated, returning to his earlier thoughts. What could he do?

“I can help out around the village.” He said with put up confidence and Wen Qing looked unimpressed.

“Like what? Catching snakes?”

“You heard about that?” Lan SiZhui asked, surprised. Wen Qing snorted.

“The whole village knows. Besides, me and Hao YiFei are close because I care for her baby.”

“Lan SiZhui was very brave, catching the snake!” Wen Ning beamed.

“Thanks.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“This happens once a year, Lan SiZhui.” Wen Qing told him, returning to their original discussion. “There’s nothing else you could help with, really.”

Lan SiZhui knew Wen Ning often went out to help others in the village. He’d told Lan SiZhui so before as well, often talked about what he was doing that day, and just as often the list was not limited to ‘helping sister with the medicine’. It was often ‘I helped herding chicken that got out of their coup!’ or, ‘I made rice cake today with A-Yi!’

“I could help fixing that roof.” The houses in the village were cheap and old, which was not a good combination when living in the middle of a forest. Water damage was common, Wen Ning told him once, so were pests. There was one particular house, at the edge of the village that had its roof collapsed inside for what seemed like a long time now. When Lan SiZhui walked there the first time, three men were standing there, watching and theorizing about how to fix it.

To his surprise and disappointment, Wen Qing laughed. “You’re not a carpenter.” She told him, sounding amused. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

"I'm strong thanks to the Lan handstands and I helped during he recovery of Cloud Recesses." He left out that little detail he was manning the library texts. He saw the construction through the window though, it didn't seem awfully complicated. Or so, Lan SiZhui figured. Wen Qing looked as skeptical as if she read his thoughts.

"Why are most houses made of wood while others are built from stone?" She asked. At Lan SiZhui's silence, she pressed her lips together sternly. "You are not a carpenter."

"Nobody is born as one. I can be trained, I'm a fast learner."

"I'm sure you are." She nodded. "However, these problems do not have a prepared answer to them. This is physical labor."

"I learned sword forms." Lan SiZhui commented dryly.

"And I've learned about medicine, yet I would not be able to do a surgery on a fish." She answered. Lan SiZhui sighed.

"I just feel like I should be doing more. Contributing. This is my birth family, after all." He said quietly.

"As part of your birth family, shouldn't you listen to me then?" Wen Qing asked sharply. "If you won't listen to me as your doctor, listen to me as your cousin. None of us expects you to do anything, especially since you're injured." She glared at him, but Lan SiZhui refused to meet her eyes. "This is not the Cloud Recesses. If you came here to visit, then don't work, just visit. You have one job now: to get better. If you are unable to archive it here, then go back home and return once you've healed."

"I want to stay." Lan SiZhui protested and Wen Qing huffed.

"If that's so, then I expect you to listen to me and do as I say."

"Everyone works so hard, even Wen Ning and he was also recently injured..."

"Don't drag him into this." Wen Qing glared. "Besides, even A-Ning takes it easy and listens when I tell him to rest. The rest of the people here also know to not task him with something straining. A few weeks ago he was not even allowed out of bed, and he could, unlike you, listen to his doctor's order to stay put." Lan SiZhui remained quiet at that, the reminder that Wen Ning had been heavily injured because of him leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

"Lan SiZhui, my s-sister is right." Wen Ning nodded eagerly. "The fastest way to heal is to listen to your doctor."

"So, you also think I should go back to the Cloud Recesses to heal?" Lan SiZhui frowned slightly. Wen Ning looked startled, not having expected this question, he first looked at his sister, then at Lan SiZhui, all the while opening and closing his mouth without saying anything.

"Why are you here exactly?" Wen Qing asked. "You had all the time to deliver Feixu, this was not an urgent matter and Wen Ning's invitation from a few months ago also included you

should come for a short visit, yet here you are, looking as if you're ready to build your own house in the village. Sect Leader Lan is nice, but he is not stupid enough to let one of the heroes of Sunshot Campaign go off to play house with some Wen just like this."

"Ah, Wen Qing, it's really not like that..." Lan SiZhui tried to say, but he didn't know how to follow that up. In the end, he just stayed quiet, and Wen Qing thankfully dropped the topic.

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It seemed like his talk with Wen Qing wasn't as fruitless as Lan SiZhui initially thought. Two days later Wen Ning bid goodbye to Wen Qing when she left, but then instead of going off on his own, he turned to Lan SiZhui.

"I'll be keeping you company today, if you don't mind? I thought maybe we could go to Buddha's Feet, take a look around." He said a little nervously. Lan SiZhui smiled at him and nodded.

"That sounds good, Wen Ning." He said, relieved he didn't need to spend the day in the house again.

"Great!" Wen Ning beamed.

"Let me get my things and we can go." Lan SiZhui offered and Wen Ning nodded, telling him he needed to get some things himself as well. They met at the gates again in a few minutes, and Wen Ning led him through the village. He said hi to a few people who were outside and they greeted him back happily.

They started down the path Lan SiZhui and Wen XiaoQiang took to get there. By now the woods were familiar, so him and Wen Ning spent the way there with idle chatter.

"Have you always lived here?" Lan SiZhui asked.

"Ah, for a little while when I was a child, then the village was attacked by the Fairy statue. Ah, you remember what sister said about you living near the Yin Iron?" Lan SiZhui remembered. Wen Qing said she sensed a... handprint of it on his soul, or something of that effect, when she examined after they've rescued her and Wen Ning from Wen Chao, and that this was the 'strangeness' Wen ZhuLiu sensed about his Golden Core.

"The Fairy statue, it attacked us because it held a shard of Yin Iron. Sect Leader Wen came to save us. At the time, me and my sister were young. Our parents died in the attack. Since our father was the Clan's leader, Wen RuoHan thought that it was his responsibility to make sure we had a good life from there on. At the time I was injured, so Wen RuoHan took us to Qishan. While I was recovering, my sister learned healing, so when she was older, she could take care of me.

"By the time I was well enough to begin my own training, I missed my chance at forming a strong Golden Core. Wen RuoHan sent us back to the village, so my sister could learn healing from our cousins here. She became famous very quickly, so a few years ago Wen

RuoHan sent for us again to take us back to Qishan. He hired my sister as his personal healer and I went because sister wouldn't go without me."

Lan SiZhui didn't know what to say to that, so he just hummed neutrally. He never heard this story in particular, but the Ghost General, when they were traveling together, had told Lan SiZhui a little about the little village where he was a child once. He talked about lush forests and kind people. Lan SiZhui could see the same kindness in him – not just currently, but in the Ghost General as well. It wasn't like the Wen Ning of the future was all that different from this Wen Ning. His personality was just as mellow and he was rather shy, if a bit more self-confident than this young man.

"How was it like, to grow up in the Cloud Recesses?" Wen Ning asked and Lan SiZhui felt some sorrow at the question – the Ghost General asked the same thing once as well. Lan SiZhui felt the same duality with Wen Ning he had felt with Lan WangJi, Lan XiChen and Wei WuXian as well – he was glad to have them here, but he was also sad they were not the same people he got to know.

At least Wen Ning was easy to talk to – they didn't know each other very well in the future either, so getting to know him did not remind him that he had been close to the other once.

He talked about cold winters and feeding bunnies. He told Wen Ning about punishments and fun things to do. He told him about his friends – some of the current time and some of his own time as well – and he told him a little bit about his family as well – just as much as would not make Wen Ning suspicious of the person he was talking about.

This talk reminded him of Lan JingYi and his continued reluctance to answer Lan SiZhui's letter. Lan SiZhui also had some new ones on him to send to both him and Jin Ling, possibly asking Jin Ling to check on their friend, see if he was alright.

They slowly reached the end of their road and got into the town at the base of Dafan Mountain. Wen Ning had simple, coarse brown robes on, while Lan SiZhui was wearing a blue robe Wen Qing gave him – it was made of a nice material, not expensive, but not as rough as Wen Ning's clothing either.

They took a look around the town. While Lan SiZhui thought he'd seen most of what Buddha's Feet had to offer, with him having been here on a night-hunt once when he and his peers found accommodation in a local inn, and him having come through here when he arrived to the Wen village, he found Wen Ning was a good guide and he showed Lan SiZhui places he hadn't been before.

They stopped briefly at the official building where Wen Ning told him the letters were sent to. Inside Lan SiZhui met Hong Qi, a courier who was all too happy to bring his letter to Cloud Recesses, though he eyed him strangely as Lan SiZhui handed it over. He still didn't get an answer from neither Jin Ling nor Lan JingYi, the courier told him, glancing towards one of the guards. Lan SiZhui found this glance strange, but he quickly forgot about it as he paid and then him and Wen Ning left.

They each had candy shaped as animals in their hands – Lan SiZhui's a rabbit, Wen Ning's a tapir – when they met Wen XiaoQiang. The other man was selling his goods, a handful of

herbs in each of his hands, calling out:

“Fresh herbs! Medical herbs for your health issues!”

When Lan SiZhui and Wen Ning got closer, he put down his hands and smiled at them, bowing. The two boys returned it, smiling.

“Mister Lan, A-Ning!” He greeted them. “What brings you two to Buddha’s Feet?”

“We’re just taking a walk, Uncle Wen.” Wen Ning answered with a smile.

“Ah, then let me invite you for a cup of tea.” Wen XiaoQiang said.

“But... sir, don’t you need to sell your herbs?” Lan SiZhui asked, gesturing at the man’s basket. Wen XiaoQiang pressed his lips together, giving Lan SiZhui a stiff smile.

“Sir, nobody buys from me anyways. There’s no point. But if I can spend some time with the two of you, at least it won’t feel too lonely here. What do you say, will you indulge this poor one?”

“Sure.” Lan SiZhui nodded, not knowing what else to say. They settled in a little shop nearby, where the waiter kept his head down as he brought their tea over. Once they begun to sip their tea, Wen XiaoQiang said:

“Mister Lan, I wanted to thank you for the other day.” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“Sir, you’ve already thanked me for bringing Feixu back. It’s really unnecessary.”

“Ah, not that, not that.” Wen XiaoQiang shook his head with a smile. “My wife, she told me how you’ve helped her with a snake. It was very kind of you.”

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui smiled. “Of course.” He bowed his head a little. “It was nothing, anyone would’ve done the same thing. I hope she and your son were not too frightened.”

“They are fine.” Wen XiaoQiang nodded.

“Lan SiZhui is truly a kind person.” Wen Ning said, smiling widely. Wen XiaoQiang turned to him.

“A-Ning, I meant to ask this earlier, how come you and your sister know him so well?” This was not an accusatory question, just curiosity, so Lan SiZhui sat back and let Wen Ning answer on his own.

“I believe my sister and him met during the GusuLan lectures, then they got closer during the indoctrination. We’ve met after the battle of Lotus Pier again, then...” He fell quiet and looked to the table. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked down as well.

“After the battle in Lotus Pier, I took Sect Leader Jiang and his wife to Wen Qing and Wen Ning to hide us there and take care of our injuries. Then Wen Chao showed up and we had to flee, but Wen Chao caught up with me. They used Wen Ning to threaten me, then I failed to

protect him and he and his sister got punished for it. I could only help them months later, and I was almost too late.”

“Ah, don’t say that!” Wen Ning protested. “We took this risk knowingly and my sister isn’t mad at you. Nobody holds you responsible, so please, don’t be so harsh on yourself.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him thinly, but didn’t say anything. Wen XiaoQiang looked between the two of them, then sighed.

“There is a lot of history between you. Since you’re also family, it’s best to let go of the resentment and be glad you all made it out alive.” He smiled at them and Lan SiZhui and Wen Ning exchanged a look, then nodded to him.

They spent the rest of their tea speaking of more mundane things, such as how Wen XiaoQiang’s business was going, how his child was doing. Wen XiaoQiang asked Lan SiZhui how he liked here, and Wen Ning about his sister and his studies.

They had a nice time together, but then Wen XiaoQiang had to return to the market and Wen Ning and Lan SiZhui decided to take one last walk before returning to the Wen village. All in all, it had been a very nice day, spending it with Wen Ning, getting to know him and getting to know Wen XiaoQiang a little better as well. Lan SiZhui liked to think he was making friends.



Two nights later Wen XiaoQiang and his wife invited the Wen siblings and Lan SiZhui to dinner. Lan SiZhui suspected this had happened before, for Wen Qing accepted the invitation without complaints. They arrived just as the sun began to set.

“Ah, you’re here!” Wen XiaoQiang smiled as he opened the door for them. He stepped aside. “Come in, come in!” Lan SiZhui followed Wen Qing and Wen Ning inside. Even though he had been to the house the other day, he didn’t have much time to take a look around. Now he noted the small courtyard that was only big enough to be respectfully called a courtyard, was nicely maintained. There was dining pavilion there, where Madam Hao was already waiting, her baby cradled to her chest and secured with a scarf.

“Madam Hao.” Lan SiZhui greeted her with a bow, and Madam Hao chuckled at him, waving dismissively.

“Mister Lan, welcome! I promise this time there is no snake to catch.” Lan SiZhui smiled at her, then they were invited to sit. Madam Hao brought out some pots from the kitchen, putting them on the table. One was a fragrant soup Lan SiZhui didn’t recognize, the other a rice dish he often indulged in during his travels.

“What kind of soup is this?” Lan SiZhui asked curiously as they were served.

“It is a family recipe for radish soup.” Madam Hao said. “It comes from A-Xin’s family, but we also make it in mine, so we just combined the two. I hope it is to your liking. A-Qing tells me you do not eat meat, so I’ve tried to accommodate your needs.”



“It’s perfect, thank you, Madam Hao.” Lan SiZhui smiled at her and she inclined her head as she put the bowl down in front of Lan SiZhui.

The soup was, as Lan SiZhui prematurely said, perfect. It was sour but sweet at the same time, white in color and not too hot. The spices were perfectly balanced, just right so that it was not too spicy but not as bland as Gusu food tended to be either. Lan SiZhui thought he would be able to eat an entire pot of this. For now, he settled for the bowl he had been served.

“Madam Hao, this soup is indeed amazing. Thanks for the trouble.” Lan SiZhui told her and her face became red at that.

“I’m glad it is to your liking, mister Lan.” She told him.

“Hao YiFei is one of the best medicine makers of this village.” Wen Qing noted. “Naturally, her food is going to be just as excellent.”

“A-Qing, you flatter me.” Madam Hao chuckled. “My craft is nothing, compared to yours.”

“It is good then, that we are not competing.” She commented. Madam Hao laughed at this and Wen Qing smiled, soft and fond.

They finished the soup, Lan SiZhui stealing a glance into the pot, but unfortunately it was empty, only a little left on the bottom. The rice was served and Lan SiZhui couldn’t wait to see if the usually lame tasting dish also transformed under Madam Hao’s hand and became something incredible.

The baby woke up then and Madam Hao excused herself to take care of him.

“How is the child doing?” Lan SiZhui found himself asking as he looked after them. He realized he asked the same thing he often heard the villagers ask Hao YiFei when they were out together. Before he could apologize for asking that as well, Wen XiaoQiang sighed, though it sounded... relieved.

“He is good.” He said. “He didn’t have any health issues in the past few weeks. We are optimistic about this, so we’ve been thinking of naming him soon and begin thinking of his future a little more seriously.”

Wen Qing nodded as well. “I also think it is time. He was born a little early, that’s why he had been so sickly, but I think it is over now.”

“I’m very glad.” Wen XiaoQiang smiled brightly, with thick emotion in his voice. “I was afraid our first baby would not survive. Surely, that would devastate A-Fei.”

“You’ve been taking very good care of him and doing everything as I asked of you.” Wen Qing said.

“A-Qing had also helped a lot.” Wen XiaoQiang said with a smile. “Here, let me get some food for you.” He stood to spoon some rice onto their plates. Lan SiZhui waited patiently. As he got the food, Wen XiaoQiang spoke: “This is actually one of the reasons—” he began, then

out of nowhere, there was a shout. Lan SiZhui was on his feet immediately, his hand going to his qiankun pouch.

“Stay put.” Wen Qing ordered as she headed towards the door. Lan SiZhui shook his head and hurried after her.

“I’m going with you.”

Before Wen Qing could answer him, the door to the courtyard shut open and one of the men from the other day, A-Su, barged in. Lan SiZhui felt the scene familiar as the other man was in a hurry, holding his sword. The biggest difference had to be the panic on his face and in Lan SiZhui’s heart.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Wen XiaoQiang jumped up as well.

“They are here.” A-Su said. The four of them blinked at him for a moment, then Wen Qing and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look.

“As the leader of this branch, I’m going to talk to them.” She said, her warm and fond tone nowhere to be found from minutes before, ice coating her words. “A-Ning, stay here. SiZhui, make sure he does as told.” She shot them a sideways glance before turning to walk briskly out of the house.

“Wait!” Lan SiZhui protested. “I should go with you. I can protect—”

“The only people who need your protection right now are Hao YiFei and her baby. As your cousin and Clan Leader, are you going to listen to me?” She glared. Lan SiZhui huffed, annoyed.

“I’m an archived cultivator and I have the necessary influence to—”

“Lan SiZhui, I don’t know why you keep thinking me a fool.” She turned to him now, her eyes hard and unforgiving. Lan SiZhui looked back at her evenly, standing her gaze. “I might not be of the main Clan and I might not practice my cultivation as dedicatedly as you, but I’m not ignorant of Sect politics.”

“I won’t get my Sect in trouble.” Lan SiZhui promised. Wen Qing nodded, as if she knew that.

“How could you, when you have no Sect? But without GusuLan behind you, what authority do you actually have?” If Lan SiZhui had any time to react to this appropriately, he probably would have. As it was, he just had to accept that somehow Wen Qing saw through him and knew the truth, even though Lan SiZhui had been trying very hard to conceal it.

“I’m ChunYu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui tried to reason, but Wen Qing snorted.

“What good does your title do when you’re openly practicing demonic cultivation? What does it do if people know you’re a Wen? The Sects will see you as one of us, if not worse. You’d worsen the situation, not help. For once, do as I say and protect my brother and cousins.”

Looking back at Wen Ning, who was the only one still sitting, looking between them with wide eyes, Lan SiZhui bowed his head and accepted his fate. Wen Qing must've understood this, because a moment later she turned and hurried out, A-Su on her heels.

"Don't worry." Wen XiaoQiang tried to placate. "A-Qing will protect us."

"But who will protect her?" Lan SiZhui wondered aloud, and at this, none of them could answer. They waited with their heads down, no longer enjoying the dinner. Hao YiFei was nowhere to be seen still, but Lan SiZhui was glad for it - he hoped she would stay somewhere safe until it all passed. When he asked Wen XiaoQiang where she was, he answered simply she is feeding the baby so she most likely haven't even heard the commotion outside. He said it would take a while, so it's best to leave her to it, in order not to stress her out.

Now, Lan SiZhui had nothing else to do but to think.

The Sects were here, which meant either they were checking the area for cultivators or the three time travelers failed at their objective. Lan SiZhui wasn't overly worried before because Jin Ling was with the Jin, but that might've meant nothing at all, just like how previous events didn't change much despite their efforts.

This led Lan SiZhui thinking about his friends. They never answered his letters, which would have probably worried him more than it did. And it did. Lan SiZhui was constantly thinking of Lan JingYi back in Cloud Recesses, what he might be up to. What if instead of Lan SiZhui, the elders decided to take their anger out on him as someone who openly defended him? But again, Lan XiChen was there to look out for Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui had faith that he would.

As for Jin Ling, he sent him a letter when he left the Cloud Recesses, informing him of his decision – logically, Jin Ling should've answered him by now. Now Lan SiZhui felt foolish for letting Jin Ling go to Qiongqi. They didn't know what the Jin planned, just trusted that Jin GuangShan was going to do everything as agreed because they pushed for all the Sects sending a representative. From the past they've learned how easily some Sect Leaders took the good faith of others and twisted it to their favor. Why couldn't Jin GuangShan do the same?

Anxiety suddenly sat heavy in Lan SiZhui's stomach. Jin Ling, unlike Lan JingYi, was alone in the nest of snakes. Why did they think this was okay? Why did they let him go to Qiongqi? They warned Jin Ling and were cautious about Jin ZiXuan's invitation, but they just assumed Jin Ling would be fine. They were lucky if Jin Ling was even alive at this point. Lan SiZhui closed his eyes and tried not to think about it, the same urgency taking over as when he was in the Burial Mounds and waiting to save Wen Ning.

Suddenly, the door of the house burst open once again. Lan SiZhui's eyes snapped open and his guqin was out before he could even make the decision to pull it out. He was looking straight at three soldiers in bright clothing.

At the light of the lanterns around the courtyard it was hard, but not impossible to make out the kind of clothes these men had on. At the sight, Lan SiZhui was brought back to months

ago when he fought side-by-side with this Sect's people. He took a deep breath and didn't pluck the strings just yet.

"ChunYu-Jun." One of the Jin soldiers greeted with a bow. "These humble ones are here to save you. Please, step aside so we can bring the guilty party in front of our general."

Lan SiZhui was confused. He blinked at the men, trying to make sense of their words, but as much as he tried, he failed to understand.

"What?" He asked rather rudely. The man took him off guard.

"Sir, we've heard from your friends that you've been kidnapped by the Wen. Please, step aside so we can punish them." Lan SiZhui blinked at him again.

"Sir, I wasn't kidnapped. I came here on my own. Who said I have been? Please, tell me so I can explain the situation to them. These people are innocent, please, put down your weapons." If this was a misunderstanding, Lan SiZhui could deal with that. The man who had been speaking, however, shook his head.

"Sir, I cannot do that. Your friends have also said these people manipulated you and tricked you and they warned us not to listen to anything you say. Please, step aside so we can take these people to our general and have him explain the situation to you properly."

"Sir, these people didn't do anything bad. Leave them alone. If your general would like to talk to me, I can certainly go and talk to him. No need to involve civilians in this matter."

The Jin soldier pressed his lips together, then glanced at his comrades before turning to Lan SiZhui and bowing to him deeply.

"Sir, excuse my actions in advance." Then, he charged at Lan SiZhui with his sword. Lan SiZhui frowned and strum the strings of his guqin. For now he used as little power as possible, using the resentment inside the Jin soldiers to stop their advance. The man charging him froze mid-movement, so did one of the other two as well. However the third soldier cried out in pain and collapsed onto his knees. Lan SiZhui frowned at the scene. He stepped forward, meaning to check on the man. However, before he could, suddenly more soldiers appeared, aiming straight at Lan SiZhui. He just had enough time to step out of their range, but unlike the other men, they did not bother with small talk.

One of them got close enough that as Lan SiZhui leaned back from his attack, a swing of the man's sword nicked his floating hair. Lan SiZhui then played *Hudie* in earnest. Black smoke rose around them and some of the men seemed startled by that, but not all of them.

Lan SiZhui tried his best to shield the Wen as he was dodging the men's attacks. He didn't have time to check on them, only looked over when he heard a metallic sound of two swords meeting. As he looked, he caught a glance of Wen Ning holding *Feixu*, stopping one of the Jin soldier's sword from killing him.

Lan SiZhui sent out a quick burst of resentful energy towards Wen Ning to shield him better. However, Lan SiZhui had only used resentful energy a handful of times to battle enemies and

all those occasions were quite different than this one.

In the past, Lan SiZhui had used resentful energy first to control fierce corpses as he got out of the Burial Mounds. Then when he battled with Wei WuXian by his side, he had the advantage of catching his enemy off-guard and being surrounded by resentful energy. The next time he used it in the Sunshot Campaign, he had the advantage of his comrades knowing about his ability and having some experience with musical cultivation. Because of that, when Lan SiZhui used resentful energy during the Sunshot Campaign, he was constantly protected by Jin Ling, Lan JingYi, or other friends. Then in the final battle when he had to fight Wen RuoHan then his son, Lan SiZhui was fortunate enough to battle them one-on-one.

This roughly meant that as far as Lan SiZhui's experience went with battling using demonic cultivation, he was either constantly protected or not having to fight multiple enemies. This meant right now he was at a disadvantage. The Wen were not only civilians, they were also not familiar with musical cultivation to know to shelter Lan SiZhui while he practiced it. He also had four people attacking him while three attacked the Wen, who had hardly any means to protect themselves.

Simply put, Lan SiZhui was in a tight spot he had no idea how to get out of. If he could only use spiritual energy...

He strum the strings, his anger making the swirling black smoke around them act violently, lashing out without mercy. Lan SiZhui couldn't afford to care, as Wen XiaoQiang's grunts, his son's cries and Wen Ning's clumsy battling echoed in his head.

One of the men choked, falling onto his knees. This drew some attention from everyone as they watched as ink-like smoke entered through the man's mouth, stayed for a little bit then shot out of him, returning to the mass swirling all around them. The man's face twisted in pain as black veins appeared on his face, and he began to bleeding from seven orifices. Eventually, he just collapsed onto his front. That's when one of the men set off a signal flare.

The battle continued. Lan SiZhui had cuts and bruises all around, not being able to defend himself as well as he could if he had spiritual energy to push the men back. He simply couldn't get the upper hand. He struggled and saw Wen Ning and Wen XiaoQiang struggle even worse. He wished he could help them, but he was helpless himself.

Then he heard a scream. It cut through all sounds around him. Him and both Wen fighting by his side looked towards the door it came from and found it open with a Jin standing in the doorway.

"A-Fei!" Wen XiaoQiang cried out and turned, charging the Jin who was threatening his wife.

"Uncle!" Wen Ning called after him as well, but then Lan SiZhui couldn't watch them any more, because the Jin surrounding him attacked. Lan SiZhui was reminded for a moment to the moment in Lotus Pier, the first time he saw Madam Yu. She was, back then, also surrounded by enemies in a circle. She looked feral with her skin and clothes covered in blood, her sword dripping of it.

Lan SiZhui wished sometimes he could be like that. He saw a lot of similarities between Jin Ling and Madam Yu, even if Jin Ling would kill him if he ever said it aloud. But the truth was, they were two of the strongest people Lan SiZhui knew.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and braced himself. He needed to center himself, calm down and concentrate. Once he felt he could, he opened his eyes and played. Black, ink-like fog gathered around Hudie, collecting into an object above the strings. The Stygian Tiger Amulet spun wildly as Lan SiZhui forced resentful energy into the people around him. A Jin soldier in front of Lan SiZhui crawled at his face as black lines sneaked up it. His eyes began bleeding. Lan SiZhui kept his gaze on him.

A moment later he felt pain shoot across his skull and he felt dizzy. Looking around he saw another Jin soldier with his sword clutched in black-veined hands, a snarl on his face. As their gazes met, he stuck again, driving the pommel of his sword onto Lan SiZhui's temple and the world went dark around him.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

Woman with baby: 豪易费 Háo YìFèi: Háo: "heroic" Yì: "surname/easy" Fèi: "surname/to spend"

## Exigency I.

As Lan SiZhui slowly gained consciousness, at first, he didn't realize he was awake at all. He was kind of just floating between awareness and sleep, not registering anything before reality slowly entered his mind. First, he didn't even know why he woke up – he didn't remember falling asleep. Then sharp pain shot through his head and his first thought was he didn't drink enough for him to feel the effects the next day. He flinched and tried to shy away from the pain, although there was no escaping it.

He blinked his eyes open to see what time of day it was, only to not recognize his surroundings. At home his bed was on the left side of the room, so when he woke, he usually had to turn left to see the inside of his room, to access the thin line of light shining onto his table from the window. As he turned to the left he just saw white painted walls and his bedlinens, which were fine and silky, much more expensive than any material Lan SiZhui ever slept in. The pain in his head intensified at the change in lighting from opening his eyes and he closed them again in hopes it would help. It did not.

He turned to his other side then, assessing the room. His head slid along a finely embroidered pillow, much rougher than his own at home, which made him think this one must be more decorated. It also felt silky, expensive. The room he looked out onto also represented wealth and fine craftsmanship. The table in the middle of the room was glazed white, with golden patterns. There were several decorations in the room, also showing off extravagant taste. Lan SiZhui was sure there not needed to be that many jade decorations and vases with flowers.

His eyes were however drawn to something else instantly. On the door and side windows was the symbol of the Sect that's home he was in. Each window was covered with papers crafted to resemble the peony, making this another show of wealth, for the windows often needed that paper replaced, so the owner showed off even if they needed to order several of this throughout the year, they didn't mind spending the money just to make the statement where the guest was staying at. Both Lotus Pier and Cloud Recesses used more permanent decorations on the doors and windows, which rarely needed replacement – the Nie didn't even bother and the Wen used textile to make up for the lack of decorations.

Now the question was, why was Lan SiZhui in Koi Tower? Just as he thought that, suddenly he remembered fighting the Jin to protect the Wen, remembered the blow to the head and remembered he was trying to protect Wen Ning, Wen XiaoQiang and Hao YiFei. He sat up so suddenly, his head felt like splitting in half, and he reached up to cradle the hurt.

His wakefulness must have alarmed someone somewhere, because a few seconds later there was a knock on the door. Lan SiZhui frowned at it, not calling out. The person entered anyways. It was a middle-aged man with a tray in his hand. He didn't even look towards Lan SiZhui as he placed the tray on the table, turning back to close the door before looking at Lan SiZhui expectantly. Lan SiZhui didn't know what the man wanted from him. He subtly reached for his sleeves, only to realize he had been redressed and was now wearing a rich gold Jin underrobe. He noticed just then that some Lan robes had been hung on a wardrobe not far from the bed. Lan SiZhui frowned.

“ChunYu-Jun, this humble one is Jin Feng. How are you feeling?” The man finally talked, his tone arrogant and condescending, as if he expected Lan SiZhui to offer this information by himself.

“Why am I here?” Lan SiZhui asked the man.

“ChunYu-Jun, this humble one is a doctor. How are you feeling?” He repeated. Lan SiZhui glared at him.

“Where is my family?” His instincts screamed at him that he was being rude, but at the moment, he didn’t care much. He had been accused, attacked and assaulted by the Jin Sect and he parted from the Lan Sect a while ago. He felt justified in his lack of manners. The man sighed, as if disappointed in Lan SiZhui.

“This is medicine, ChunYu-Jun. Please, take one soon. I will inform the kitchens you are awake and have a servant bring you food.” With that, the man turned and walked out. Lan SiZhui frowned after him, then waited, but no one came in again. He got up slowly, his head pulsing with pain at the rate of his heartbeat and he winced every time it felt like he was being knocked in the head again and again.

The floor was warm, which surprised him, but perhaps shouldn’t have, and his feet didn’t make a sound as he went over to the table, carefully lowering himself to the ground across the door. He pulled the tray closer, seeing a teapot and cups, a small bowl with two white pills in it and a rock rod. He was confused until he realized the rod was made of the same material as the little bowl, and then he realized it wasn’t a bowl but a mortar. The doctor must’ve given him the medicine this way while he was unconscious.

This reminded him and Lan SiZhui took a careful look around again, but he didn’t see any indication that his guqin or sword was ever in this room.

What was Lan SiZhui doing in Koi Tower?

He took the pills and drank the tea. Even the Jin Sect wouldn’t be so shameless as poisoning Lan SiZhui through his medicine, and his head was truly hindering his thought process, so he hoped the pills would help with the pain.

As he waited the medicine to take effect, he thought. The last he saw before losing consciousness had been seeing a Jin soldier in the door of the room where Hao YiFei was, Wen XiaoQiang going towards them to protect them.

The Jin came to him with the excuse that his friends reported him kidnapped and manipulated by the Wen. He thought of the absence of Jin Ling and Lan JingYi’s letters. It was impossible that they actually said this to anyone. Most likely this was a plot by a Jin to get him to Koi Tower, but at what purpose?

Lan SiZhui was a Lan, former Lan, at that. He was also a demonic cultivator. He was a hero of the Sunshot Campaign. Jin GuangYao most likely knew they were from the future. Lan SiZhui couldn’t put it together. If Jin GuangYao’s game was based on their origins from the future, what would he gain with his actions? He got Jin Ling to stay at Qiongqi Path with Jin



ZiXuan. He got Lan SiZhui into the Koi Tower with also managing to incriminate the Wen even if he had no proof Lan SiZhui knew of about them kidnapping him.

He needed to talk to his friends. This didn't make any sense to him. Finally feeling a little better, Lan SiZhui stood and dressed before going to the door. With a big breath, he opened the door.

There were two guards standing outside his room. They didn't seem to be hostile, though the moment the door opened they turned to him and eyed him with suspicion. Lan SiZhui ignored them for the moment in favor of gathering where exactly in the Koi Tower he was. He saw side buildings but not the main buildings, so most likely he was pretty deep. He also didn't remember how much time had passed since he went to the Wen village. He turned his attention to the guards and bowed to them. They returned it with murmured greetings.

"I would like to speak to Sect Leader Jin." Lan SiZhui told them. To this, the two exchanged a look, seemingly not too fond of Lan SiZhui's request.

"Sir, please remain in your rooms until further notice." One of them said. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"Am I a prisoner?" He asked, and the guards once again exchanged a look.

"Sir, please go back." The other one asked, bowing. Lan SiZhui considered pushing through them to get out, but then he changed his mind. They couldn't keep him here without a reason forever. He went back into the room, sat on the ground in Lotus position and meditated.

Two days passed this way. Lan SiZhui's only visitor was the healer and a servant who brought him food. The healer was arrogant and didn't talk much, but the servant was nice, smiling at Lan SiZhui when he thanked for the food. While he waited for anything to happen, Lan SiZhui looked around the room but found absolutely nothing of use.

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At the end of the two days, things changed. From the moment he woke, Lan SiZhui heard people around his room, not just the occasional talk of the guards like before but other voices as well, many of them. Also, a lot of people were walking around. From what Lan SiZhui heard, he could guess what was going on and he felt somewhat relieved. He didn't know how much time had passed, but apparently it was time for the Crowd Hunt.

"This room is going to be Second Young Master Lan's." He heard from near his room. "Make sure that everything is clean and tidy. The servants will bring the books in a few hours, you need to be finished by then. Second Young Master Lan is also good friends with Wei WuXian, so make sure you put some alcohol on one of the shelves, in case he comes to visit. And someone get a guqin stand! Ah, sister, there you are!"

With that the servant's voice faded and Lan SiZhui heard shuffling around in the room next to his. He got up and opened the door, looking around. The guards eyed him suspiciously but made no move to stop him.

“Sir, is this going to be Hanguang-Jun’s room next to mine?” He asked a passing servant, who stopped and looked at him with wide eyes. He was holding a cushion in his hands.

“Scatter!” One of the guards growled at the servant, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “Sir, please don’t talk to the staff.”

“Who should I aim my questions then?” Lan SiZhui asked, annoyed. “Sect Leader Jin refuses to see me and I’m kept prisoner. I’m ChunYu-Jun, hero of the Sunshot Campaign. I expect better treatment than this from the renowned Jin Sect.” This was probably the first time Lan SiZhui spoke this way to anyone, but he felt nothing else would go over the Jin’s defenses.

“Ah, sir...” The guard began, but before he could continue, a new voice cut him off.

“Esteemed ChunYu-Jun, please excuse the Jin Sect for neglecting your needs!” Lan SiZhui looked over, seeing Jin GuangYao heading towards them from the maze of buildings, his hands in his sleeves, a serene smile on his face. As soon as he got closer, the two guards bowed to him, so did Lan SiZhui.

“Second Master Jin.” He greeted and Jin GuangYao returned his bow.

“ChunYu-Jun, thank you for your patience. My father had been busy tending to matters regarding the Crowd Hunt and could not see you earlier.”

“He will see me now?” Lan SiZhui asked. Jin GuangYao smiled and Lan SiZhui repressed a shiver.

“He asked me to keep you company until he is available. If you’d follow me, ChunYu-Jun.” Jin GuangYao gestured towards the way he came. Lan SiZhui had the instinct to go back and grab his sword and guqin until he realized said tools were missing right now. Since he had nothing else in the room, he bowed and followed Jin GuangYao.

This was the first time Lan SiZhui had been so deep in Koi Tower. He had visited before, as brief as that was, but he had never been past the reception hall. The Sects didn’t bring juniors to discussion conferences, so Lan SiZhui barely had any reason to come. He had been night-hunting in the area once when he was seventeen and Hanguang-Jun was expected to stop by Koi Tower and greet Jin GuangYao. They had a meal and some tea, then Hanguang-Jun excused them and they went on to their night-hunt without any more interaction with the Jin.

The buildings inside the Jin Sect’s home were just as the main buildings have been. Expensive decorations hung from white-walled buildings, their roofs light brown with yellow edging. Peonies decorated rich gardens scattered across the place. It was airy and spacious, and the servants always kept to one side, heads bowed and looking at the ground.

The building Jin GuangYao brought Lan SiZhui was not the main reception hall. This looked like a smaller one, for only a handful of guests. Still, it was richly decorated, the inside painted turquoise to compliment the gold trimming. Jin GuangYao invited Lan SiZhui to sit, then with a wave of his hand summoned two servants, who each served one of them, filling their cups with sweet-smelling tea.

After they appreciated the first sip, Jin GuangYao began talking.

“ChunYu-Jun, I hope your injuries are better and are not serious.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui, who didn’t return it.

“Mn.” He replied.

“Are the accommodations to your liking?” Jin GuangYao asked next.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui took a pause, then asked what he wished to know himself. “Second Master Jin, why am I here?”

“We’re waiting for Sect Leader Jin.” Jin GuangYao said with a confused little smile. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“Sir, I’m trying not to be rude, but I’ve been accused, attacked and assaulted by the Jin Sect’s soldiers in my childhood home. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to receive an explanation.”

Jin GuangYao seemed curious and apologetic at the same time.

“ChunYu-Jun, I don’t quite understand. The Jin soldiers acted righteously according to the information we’ve received about your whereabouts.”

“And where did you exactly receive this information?” Lan SiZhui asked, starting to feel frustrated. He knew Jin GuangYao often talked past the issue and gave non-answers, trying to appear diplomatic. For the first time he felt he understood Jiang Cheng’s frustration with the man.

“ChunYu-Jun, we would never act on a whim.” Jin GuangYao said. Lan SiZhui huffed.

“Second Master Jin, I’m going to be frank. The Jin soldiers said my friends informed you that I’ve been kidnapped and manipulated by the Wen. Could you tell me who those so-called friends were?”

“ChunYu-Jun must know.” Jin GuangYao smiled.

“The friends I know would never say this, since both of them knew my intention to go to the Wen village after the Sunshot Campaign ended.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “Lan JingYi had been fully informed, so had been Sect Leader Lan, about my travels. The only person I informed perhaps slightly later than necessary had been Jin Ling, but he would never betray me like so. Any other friends I have had not been informed about my decision and even if they learned this, they all knew I had responsibilities towards the Wen and about my relationship with Doctor Wen.”

“Mn.” Jin GuangYao looked down, still wearing a smile. Lan SiZhui took a deep, calming breath.

“Where are the Wen who live in that village?”

“Naturally they have been contained and are awaiting trial for their crimes.” Jin GuangYao said.

“Sir, no crime had been committed.” Lan SiZhui told him pointedly.

“Respectfully, ChunYu-Jun, I disagree.” Jin GuangYao bowed while sitting. “The Wen had rebelled as we were trying to rescue you and injured several Jin soldiers.”

“So, even if they were not guilty in kidnapping me, you will still charge them.” Lan SiZhui concluded sourly. This was probably the Jin’s plan all along, but Lan SiZhui still felt like a giant fool. If Jin Ling was there, he would’ve seen this plot coming.

“Sir, upon the agreed terms, the Jin Sect is acting righteously in holding them responsible.” Jin GuangYao told him. Lan SiZhui was not happy.

“What of those who did not fight?”

“Sir, I’m not sure what you mean.” Jin GuangYao smiled awkwardly. “Everyone in the village fought, once the cultivator Wen Ning began.” Lan SiZhui frowned at this.

“Wen Ning’s cultivation is as insignificant as Second Master Nie’s and he doesn’t even have Second Master Nie’s education to aid him.” Jin GuangYao didn’t comment on this, just inclined his head. Lan SiZhui huffed. “Sir, there were children and elderly among the villagers. Are you saying they also fought the Jin soldiers?”

“There were no children and elderly among the villagers, sir.” Jin GuangYao looked at him confused. Lan SiZhui frowned, trying to think. Naturally, Jin GuangYao could be lying and saying this to cover up them holding children and elderly prisoners. It was also possible the villagers hid them to protect them. For now, he let this topic drop.

It was a good thing, too, because Jin GuangShan entered then. He strode inside the room with no consideration of the other people’s occupation. He stood beside Jin GuangYao, who, along with Lan SiZhui stood to greet him.

“Ah, ChunYu-Jun, what a delight to be in your company once again.” Jin GuangShan smiled at him warmly and Lan SiZhui once again had the feeling the Jin Sect Leader wasn’t as bad as they said. He considered what Jin Ling would say to this thought. He would probably say Lan SiZhui was naïve who was easy to manipulate with a few nice words. The reality was Lan SiZhui didn’t sense any malice from Jin GuangShan. Unlike his son, the man was easy to read.

“Sect Leader Jin.” Lan SiZhui greeted, not offering the same pleasantries in return. In reality he was not too happy to see the Jin Sect Leader, for he didn’t want to be here in the first place.

“Please, let us sit.” Jin GuangShan gestured, then waited until Lan SiZhui sat to sit himself. Once they have, Jin GuangYao remained standing, turning to his father.

“Father, if I’m not needed here, I must go oversee the preparations for the Crowd Hunt.” Jin GuangShan smiled at Lan SiZhui, not looking at his son as he waved a dismissive hand. Jin GuangYao bowed and then bowed to Lan SiZhui before exiting the room.

“ChunYu-Jun, I hope you are feeling better?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Then he decided to pull a page from Jin Ling’s book and added: “The Jin Sect’s soldiers are truly talented, for the blow they served me didn’t even leave a mark.” Jin GuangShan’s smile thinned at that, but remained on his face. He looked sheepish.

“ChunYu-Jun, I must apologize for the method my men brought you here by. I can assure you, even if they acted according to their orders, they were much too harsh and will be punished accordingly.”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together. “Sect Leader Jin, with all due respect, I’m struggling to understand how this happened at all.” He said, hoping Jin GuangShan was slightly more reasonable than Jin GuangYao.

“What do you mean?” Jin GuangShan asked a confused furrow appearing between his eyebrows, disturbing his vermilion mark.

“Sect Leader Jin, your men said, and just now your son also confirmed you’ve been informed by... ‘my friends’ that I’ve been kidnapped and manipulated by the Wen.” Jin GuangShan nodded and Lan SiZhui frowned at him. “But Sect Leader Jin, I haven’t been kidnapped at all. I informed not just my friends but also Sect Leader Lan about going to Dafan Mountain to stay with the Wen for a while.”

“Hm.” Jin GuangShan seemed deep in thought, raising a hand to rub at his chin. “ChunYu-Jun, we definitely acted according to the information we’ve received.”

“Yes, but where did that information come from?” Lan SiZhui asked. “None of my friends would set me up like this.”

“I believe the letter came from MouShi.” Jin GuangShan looked up and gestured sharply. A servant appeared. “A-Si, go to my office and fetch the letter.”

“Yes, Sect Leader.” The servant bowed and hurried off.

“So you’re saying even Jin Ling knew about your decision?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “We’ve discussed it earlier after the Sunshot Campaign ended, but when I set off I also sent him a letter with the details. Even if he didn’t receive the letter, he knew where I was going and why.”

“And are you sure there was no truth to his words?” Jin GuangShan raised his eyebrows. “The Wen could’ve, after all, manipulated you into thinking that is how it went down, but in reality, you didn’t go there on your own at all?”

“If Sect Leader Jin has doubts, please talk to Lan Xi—Sect Leader Lan. He could hardly be manipulated by the Wen and he was the one to consul me about this.”

“Perhaps we should do that, once they arrive.” Jin GuangShan nodded, then looked up when the door opened, holding out his hand, awaiting something to be put in it. However, the servant stopped at the edge of the table and bowed deeply.

“Sect Leader Jin, I’m afraid there has been a crime. The letter you wished to see was not in your office, nor any other places where Sect Leader Jin usually puts important documents. I’ve consulted Second Master Jin as well, he didn’t take it either. He is now organizing a search for the whole Koi Tower.”

“What? But how could that be?” Jin GuangShan glared at his servant wide-eyed. “Nobody else has access to that room!” He said, anger making his face red.

“We will investigate, Sect Leader Jin.” The servant bowed deeply again, then stayed that way until Jin GuangShan made an impatient gesture at him.

“ChunYu-Jun.” Jin GuangShan said after a pause, not looking at Lan SiZhui, but down at his tea instead. “This is unfortunate, but not intentional on my part. There was a letter and it definitely said those things we’ve acted by.” He looked up then, his gaze steely. “Once your friends arrive, they will be able to confirm it. Until then, I ask for your patience and apology.”

“Sect Leader Jin, it is not me you’ve harmed and offended with your actions, but the Wen Clan of Dafan Mountain.” Lan SiZhui said coldly. “I advise you to let them go until the investigation concludes a definite answer.” Jin GuangShan held his gaze for a beat.

“ChunYu-Jun, the Wen who had been in that village that day attacked my soldiers. By your own request we will only imprison those Wen who have harmed someone, but then I also ask you to keep yourself to this pact and do not ask me to let them go.”

“They acted out of self-defense.” Lan SiZhui frowned. “Sect Leader Jin, I also attacked your men and might’ve even killed some. Why do I get this treatment while the rest of my family is suffering?”

“Please, don’t be mad on their behalf.” Jin GuangShan said, placating. “They are held prisoners, not being tortured. I assure you, they don’t suffer more than you do.”

“Sect Leader Jin, please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d like to see that myself.” Lan SiZhui chanced sounding rude. Jin GuangShan let out a small chuckle.

“If ChunYu-Jun wishes to see them himself, naturally I cannot deny you. But I ask you to wait with this until the end of the Crowd Hunt. The guests should be begin arriving this afternoon and we have still a lot to do. Until the Lan Sect arrives, I advise ChunYu-Jun to stay in his rooms and recover from his injuries.”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and didn’t protest. There was no point, he saw it on Jin GuangShan that this was the last drop with him. He cleared his throat, lowering his eyes and bowed.

“I’ll do as Sect Leader Jin advises.” At this, Jin GuangShan seemed pleased, nodding with a look of a proud grandfather.

“Naturally, as soon as anything is revealed during the investigation for the letter, I will inform ChunYu-Jun. I will figure out who have tricked us into thinking you were in danger. I advise you also talk to your friends, see if they really didn’t send the letter.” Lan SiZhui didn’t make his skepticism known again, just nodded. “If that is all, please forgive me, I have to attend several matters. This servant will take you back to your rooms.” He gestured and suddenly there was a servant next to Lan SiZhui. He nodded and stood bowing to Jin GuangShan. The Sect Leader inclined his head, then watched with a thoughtful expression as Lan SiZhui was led outside.

Once there, Lan SiZhui settled in his room and awaited further instructions. He highly doubted Jin GuangYao would come for him again personally, so he listened to every servant that passed his room, in case they were here to fetch him.

They only came for him in the middle of the afternoon. Lan SiZhui was meditating when the servant knocked on his door. He opened his eyes and called out to the servant to enter. It was the same one Jin GuangShan called A-Si. He bowed deeply to Lan SiZhui.

“Sir, the GusuLan Sect has arrived. Sect Leader Jin asked me to take you to the reception hall to meet Sect Leader Lan. Please, follow me.”

Lan SiZhui followed the servant through the maze of Koi Tower until they arrived to a more familiar place; the reception hall. The reception hall was just as decorative and pretentious as the rest of Koi Tower.

Inside many servants were running around, seeing to the needs of ten white-clothed disciples and the two masters. Lan SiZhui’s entrance caught the attention of the disciples and Lan SiZhui saw some whisper among themselves as he passed them to arrive in front of the Sect Leaders. Lan XiChen was watching Lan SiZhui with furrowed brows. Lan WangJi looked at him what Lan SiZhui could read off his face as curiosity. Strangely, Lan SiZhui didn’t see Lan JingYi among them.

Lan SiZhui stopped in front of them and bowed deeply. Lan XiChen rose and turned to Jin GuangShan.

“Sect Leader Jin, when you said there is someone who will join us I did not expect you to bring out my own disciple. What is the meaning of this?”

“As I said, Sect Leader Lan, I will explain.” Jin GuangShan said, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “ChunYu-Jun, please, take a seat.” He gestured to the place on the other side of the hall across from Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi, on Jin GuangShan’s right hand side. Lan XiChen also returned to his seat, looking over at Lan SiZhui with a questioning expression. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked towards Jin GuangShan. The other Sect Leader also turned to him.

“ChunYu-Jun, I’m afraid my investigation still hasn’t revealed anything. My son, Jin GuangYao has been searching the whole time.” He shook his head with a sad expression. Then, he turned to Lan XiChen. “Sect Leader Lan, I know you are curious as to why ChunYu-Jun is here, so I will tell you now. Some days ago I have personally received a letter in which one of ChunYu-Jun’s friends detailed that ChunYu-Jun had been seen being taken to

the Wen village in the Dafan mountain range by Wen men. The letter also suggested this action had been against ChunYu-Jun's will and that he was tricked into staying in the village."

Lan XiChen's expression became more and more confused as Jin GuangShan kept talking. Lan SiZhui was also surprised; this was the first time he heard what was the content of the letter.

"But SiZhui had gone there to visit his birth family." Lan XiChen said. "He informed two of his closest friends and me. Any other friends he has also know that he is Wen by birth, so to see him in a Wen village should not alarm anyone he knows intimately. Sect Leader Jin, is it possible that the letter had been forged by a wrongdoer?"

"This is what we are trying to figure out." Jin GuangShan nodded. "It is unfortunate that Feng CiKe isn't here to confirm or deny it was him who sent a letter and my son, Jin ZiXuan, reports that MouShi also left the Qiongqi Path about a week ago." This was new information even for Lan SiZhui and he felt frustrated that Jin GuangShan didn't tell him but was telling to Lan XiChen now.

"The letter?" Lan WangJi asked, looking over at Jin GuangShan coldly. Jin GuangShan looked over at Lan XiChen questioningly, who clarified:

"Sect Leader Jin, may we see this letter?" At this, Jin GuangShan pressed his lips together and shook his head.

"Unfortunately, when ChunYu-Jun requested the same thing, we've discovered that the letter disappeared. My son, Jin GuangYao is now investigating the matter."

"Ah, but... How did SiZhui get here?" Lan XiChen asked. At this, Lan WangJi pointedly turned to look at Lan SiZhui and on instinct Lan SiZhui immediately began to talk.

"As one day we were having dinner at a friend's residence, Wen Qing and I heard a shout from the village. We got up to investigate the sound. By then one of the villagers came to fetch Wen Qing as the head of the Clan to deal with the matter at hand. He informed us that the Sects were there to take the Wen. Wen Qing left me at the friend's residence to look after Wen Ning and the others. Then three Jin soldiers broke into the house. I thought we could settle this matter peacefully, so I inquired after their reason of being there. They told me they were going to take me to their general, so he can explain the situation, but they still let me know they were there to 'save me' from the Wen. I told them it was not as they thought, but they said 'my friends' also said I was being manipulated by the Wen, so they should not listen to me. After I refused to go until I knew my friends were safe, the Jin soldiers attacked us. We fought briefly, then I received a blow to the head and woke here."

Lan SiZhui recited this as if he was giving a night-hunt report. He was so used to Hanguang-Jun silently looking at him, expecting him to explain a situation he didn't even think that he was answering in Jin GuangShan's stead. Now Lan SiZhui murmured an apology and bowed towards the Jin Sect Leader. Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi listened to this carefully, then Lan XiChen turned to Jin GuangShan.



“Sect Leader Jin, my disciple had suffered by your men’s hand. I understand you acted according to what you thought was righteous, but since Lan SiZhui comes from the Lan Sect, you should’ve informed me about your suspicions and leave this matter to me.” Lan SiZhui rarely heard Lan XiChen so mad. Though his voice was low and even and he as speaking calmly, the clenching of his jaw gave away his anger.

Jin GuangShan inclined his head. “Sect Leader Lan, naturally I wanted to act as soon as possible. I apologize for my shortcomings, but you must admit, since I was the one who received the letter and since the other Sects are currently recuperating from the war while the Jin Sect remains unshaken, it was reasonable for me to act on my own.”

“Sect matters should be handled by the Sect, no matter who received the information.” Lan WangJi said with a sharp look.

“Hanguang-Jun, didn’t I just tell you my reasons?” Jin GuangShan asked as if he was saying the same thing for the thousandth time. “Naturally, as your allies, we didn’t want to burden you with this, right after the war.”

“Implying the Lan Sect is too weak to deal with a village full of civilians is offensive to the Lan Sect.” Lan WangJi said coldly. Lan XiChen sighed.

“Sect Leader Lan, as a Sect Leader, I know you understand my thinking.” Jin GuangShan turned to the other brother. “Naturally, Second Young Master Lan is justified to feel offended. I apologize if I said something offensive. It wasn’t my intention.”

Jin GuangShan’s apology didn’t seem to move Lan WangJi at all, who just turned his head and looked over at Lan SiZhui. Lan XiChen inclined his head towards Jin GuangShan, but before he could accept the apology verbally, Lan WangJi spoke again.

“The Wen?” Lan SiZhui noticed Lan XiChen beginning to explain this, but Lan SiZhui understood.

“According to Sect Leader Jin, the residents of the village had been taken prisoners. I have not been able to learn more about their fate.” Lan WangJi nodded, then turned towards Jin GuangShan. Lan XiChen gave his brother and Lan SiZhui a brief curious glance, then he, too, turned to Sect Leader Jin.

“Sect Leader Jin, may we know more about the people who had been with Lan SiZhui at the time?”

“Ah, as I told ChunYu-Jun, in the fight resulting in bringing ChunYu-Jun several Wen attacked my men. Even if it was a mistake to go there, the Wen fought us and injured my men, killed two as well. According to the laws we’ve agreed upon during the discussion conference in Nightless City, they are to be brought in for trial.”

Lan XiChen pressed his lips together – just like Lan SiZhui, he had no good argument for that.

“As Lan SiZhui’s family, will you let him attend the trial?” Lan XiChen asked and Jin GuangShan inclined his head, though he did not look too happy about it. After this, there was a pause in the conversation. Lan XiChen sighed and exchanged a look with Lan WangJi. “Then, Sect Leader Jin it is time for the GusuLan Sect to rest before the Crowd Hunt starts tomorrow.”

“Mn.” Jin GuangShan nodded with a smile. He turned to Lan WangJi. “Hanguang-Jun, I cannot wait to see you compete.” Lan WangJi didn’t comment on that, but Jin GuangShan didn’t seem to mind. He turned to Lan XiChen. “Then, ZeWu-Jun, I will see you tomorrow on the dias.”

Lan XiChen stood and at this, all Lan Sect disciples and Lan SiZhui did so as well. They all bowed to Jin GuangShan, who just inclined his head with a small smirk. As Lan XiChen turned, he made a small gesture towards Lan SiZhui. He realized Lan XiChen expected him to slit between the Lan Sect disciples, so Lan SiZhui followed closely after Lan WangJi. The other disciples threw him a look, but other than that they didn’t complain, following after Lan SiZhui.

Just before they exited the reception hall, Lan SiZhui suddenly remembered something and abruptly he turned back. The disciples behind him thankfully were quick to respond and Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi also stopped at the commotion.

“Ah, my apologies.” Lan SiZhui bowed to the disciples briefly. Some looked at him with annoyance, some with amusement, some in indifference. Lan SiZhui turned to Jin GuangShan. He looked at Lan SiZhui curiously. “Sect Leader Jin, since I’m going to attend the Crowd Hunt, I will need my weapons back.”

At this, Jin GuangShan seemed sheepish.

“Of course, ChunYu-Jun, I’ll have them delivered to your rooms later.”

“Thank you, Sect Leader Jin.” Lan SiZhui bowed to him, then turned, finding Lan XiChen looking at him with a tight expression and Lan WangJi looking at Jin GuangShan coldly. After a moment, Lan XiChen nodded to Jin GuangShan, then the Lan Sect left the reception hall.

Once they were led back to where Lan SiZhui’s rooms also were and the disciples retired for the day, Lan XiChen turned to Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi.

“Come, let us talk in my rooms.” Lan SiZhui nodded and the two of them followed Lan XiChen to his rooms. The Sect Leader closed the door and quickly applied a silencing talisman. As they sat, Lan SiZhui quickly took it upon himself to serve tea. Once they’ve settled, Lan XiChen began: “I wanted to talk to you both about the upcoming Crowd Hunt. Sect Leader Jin doesn’t seem to be aware of Lan SiZhui’s position, so it might be for the best if we keep pretending for now.”

Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows at this. “But Sect Leader Lan, I left the Sect exactly because of situations like this. ZeWu-Jun had nothing to do with this situation.”

“Yes.” Lan XiChen nodded. “But the only reason Sect Leader Jin didn’t kill all the Wen right away was because he thought you were still with the Lan Sect and he thought angering you would anger us as well and he can’t afford that right now.” Lan XiChen looked at Lan SiZhui. “This is why I protested you leaving the Sect. You and your birth family will have much more protection if you stay.”

“With respect, ZeWu-Jun, I can manage on my own.”

“Do not be stubborn.” Lan WangJi said with a stern look. Lan SiZhui made a face.

“Hanguang-Jun, I’m not trying to be difficult, but you must see the same thing. I cannot burden the Lan Sect with this. The Wen Sect are common enemy. If you try to defend them, you not only go against the Jin Sect, but also the Nie and Jiang. While I don’t believe the Lan Sect to be weak, the war had taken many of our people and if we were to face the three Sects, we wouldn’t survive.”

“If the Wen are innocent, we will be acting according to the deal.” Lan WangJi said. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“Hanguang-Jun, no offense, but very few people care about innocence when it comes to the Wen Sect.” He said sadly. Lan WangJi looked at him stubbornly, but Lan XiChen spoke.

“WangJi, while it seems SiZhui is being stubborn about this, he is not speaking without reason.” Lan XiChen paused, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “Although I still believe it is better if for now we don’t reveal that you’ve parted from the Lan Sect. We needn’t to say it explicitly, but we needn’t to say otherwise either.”

“Sect Leader Lan suggests we just... don’t comment on it?” Lan SiZhui frowned. “But what about the Crowd Hunt? As someone outside of the Sect, I should not stand with the Lan Sect, but Jin GuangShan is also very adamant on me participating.”

“Do not attend the greeting ceremony.” Lan WangJi said. Lan XiChen looked at him surprised and thoughtfully, then nodded.

“WangJi is right. It is not mandatory for all the attending Sect disciples to show up, though it is expected, there should be no problem if you skip the ceremony. If you do not attend this, nobody can say which Sect you belong to when the Hunt goes underway. Many smaller Clans and Sects will mingle anyways.”

“What about my forehead ribbon?” Lan SiZhui asked, not arguing with the plan.

“Nobody is to comment.” Lan WangJi said. Lan XiChen nodded.

“Mn. The forehead ribbon is a personal belonging. Nobody has the right to comment on yours missing. As you’ve seen just now, Jin GuangShan didn’t say a word about it although we spoke as if you were still part of the Sect.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Your injuries.” Lan WangJi asked after a pause. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“I still cannot use my spiritual energy. Wen Qing said it is still a year until I can safely cultivate. The injuries I’ve sustained while fighting the Jin have been tended to and started to heal.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded.

“And is it true what Sect Leader Jin said? Have the Wen been fighting the Jin?” Lan XiChen asked.

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I was in a very secluded spot at the edge of the village. The people I was with, Wen XiaoQiang was protecting his wife and baby and Wen Ning was trying to help him. The Jin certainly attacked first and we’ve acted in self-defense. As for the rest of the village, I’m not sure.”

“Alright.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Once Lan JingYi and Jin Ling arrive, you should talk to them about the letters. I will also try to find out as much as I can from Jin GuangShan.”

“Ah, Sect Leader Lan should leave the investigation to me!” Lan SiZhui protested.

“SiZhui, I’m Sect Leader. Even if Jin GuangShan doesn’t like me, he should tell me the information I request.”

“Leave it to brother.” Lan WangJi told him. Lan SiZhui sighed and accepted this. Lan XiChen watched the two of them with a small, fond smile on his face, then turned to his brother.

“WangJi, you may go now. Please, make sure the disciples know not to gossip about Lan SiZhui’s position in the Sect, and if anyone asks, not to reveal why he doesn’t have a forehead ribbon.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded, standing and bowing briefly before exiting the room. Once he was gone, Lan XiChen made sure the silencing charm held, then turned to Lan SiZhui.

“Is there anything you couldn’t tell me while we spoke to Jin GuangShan and WangJi?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Qiongqi Path is dangerous. If the Wen are being kept there, I need to bring them out as soon as possible.” Lan SiZhui told Lan XiChen, who nodded with understanding – he must still remember this from their conversation before the discussion conference in Qishan. Lan SiZhui paused, then hesitated before bringing up the next thing. “Sect Leader Lan, where is Lan JingYi?”

Lan XiChen nodded, as if anticipating the question. “He will join us once the Crowd Hunt starts. I also wanted to talk to you about this. Since you’ve left, Lan JingYi constantly wrote you letters, but you never answered any. At first, he figured you were just busy, then he got anxious when one of Jin Ling’s letters announced you also haven’t responded to him. I am unsure of their private discussions, since they didn’t share with me, but Jin Ling came to the Cloud Recesses about a week ago. Him and Lan JingYi decided to visit you at Dafan mountain before the Crowd Hunt begins, to see if you were alright.”

“They’ve never arrived.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, uneasy. “Ah, but I also haven’t received any messages from either of them, even though I sent them letters as well.”

“That is strange.” Lan XiChen frowned. “I’ve even caught him once at the gates, giving a handsome tip to the courier so you get the letter.” He paused. “This thing with the letters is extremely suspicious. Who could be orchestrating this?”

“I also thought the same thing.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I have a suspicion as to who could be behind this, but I don’t know what their endgame is. I should wait until Jin Ling and Lan JingYi get here to confirm it.”

“Alright.” Lan XiChen nodded, seemingly accepting it. “Are you sure you’re feeling alright?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “My head often hurts, but I get constant medication here and it helps.”

“That is good to hear. Then please, go back and rest. Tomorrow the Crowd Hunt begins and you need to be ready.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then did as told.



The rest of the Sects arrived that afternoon. Lan SiZhui heard from his room as they were led to their rooms. Although the Sects were still separated into their own quarters at Koi Tower, since the Jin Sect’s home was not as segmented as Nightless City, the Sects had free access to the others. The Lan Sect’s disciples’ rooms were around Lan SiZhui’s, while the Nie Sect got their place next to them. The Jiang Sect was also close by. Since there was only three other Sects to house, there was plenty of room.

Lan SiZhui quickly learned the Crowd Hunt’s schedule from a servant, so he knew what to expect. The Crowd Hunt took place in Phoenix Mountain, a place in Jin Sect territory that was free of villages and people, so the Jin Sect kept some beasts there to train their juniors. It was, unofficially, the Jin Sect’s private hunting ground.

Since the Sects were invited to Koi Tower first, to take rest and to return here once the Hunt concluded, this night there would be a banquet held, not mandatory for all Sects and disciples. The next day they would depart in the morning and ride to Phoenix Mountain. Once there, there would be a greeting ceremony, then a banquet at night for the attending Sects and Clans.

The next day the Crowd Hunt would begin, opening with an archery competition to determine who could enter the mountain, depending on skill which path they could take. The Sects and Clans must have their head disciple try only once, determining like this who could have an entry ticket, but everyone else was allowed to try as many times as they pleased, though their price would be different. Then the Hunt would start and the participants must collect as much prey as possible. The Sect who collected the most would win the event and

have a special place at the Flower Banquet following the Crowd Hunt, as well as the favor of the Jin Sect.

After the Hunt concluded, the participants would travel back to Koi Tower. There they would be given time to rest before the next night a Flower Banquet would be held to honor the winner and placate the losers, courtesy of the Jin Sect. The Sects would be leaving three days later, after they've seen and wondered at Koi Tower and Lanling's beauty.

Lan SiZhui found this to be a little too much, pretentious, just like everything else the Jin Sect did. He didn't comment, however, just thanked the servant and let her go on her way.

That night, many happy sounds could be heard from the reception Hall. Lan SiZhui didn't attend, but he heard Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi leave to participate before Lan WangJi returned, not long after departing. Since it was nighttime, the Lan Sect's quarters were quiet, everyone who wasn't at the banquet, sleeping.

The next morning Lan SiZhui woke as if he was still at the Cloud Recesses. The Sects all gathered at their courtyard after breakfast. Lan XiChen gathered his disciples. As he looked over at Lan SiZhui, their gazes met and Lan XiChen nodded to him before turning back to his duties. Most cultivators would travel to Phoenix Mountain via swords but there were also many who would go by horse. Lan SiZhui was one of those. As he adjusted his horse's bridle, suddenly a Jin servant ran into the courtyard. He bowed to Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi, but didn't stop, going over to Lan SiZhui and bowing to him too. He then leaned close and said quietly in Lan SiZhui's ear:

"Sect Leader Jin would like you to know there had not been a development about the investigation. He has to leave for Phoenix Mountain, but he will leave one of his most trusted here to continue the investigation. As soon as there is word, he will notify ChunYu-Jun, no matter where he is."

With the message concluded, the servant stepped back and bowed to Lan SiZhui, who returned it briefly before the servant hurried off. Lan XiChen was watching him with a curious look, but also many Sect disciples also looked towards him, so Lan SiZhui decided not to go up to him. He made a gesture, hopefully conveying that he'd share later and the message wasn't urgent. Lan XiChen nodded and turned back to his conversation with Lan WangJi.

They set off soon enough. The Sect Leaders rode via swords as well as several high-ranking disciples as well. Curiously, Wei WuXian was not amongst them. He rode his horse in front of some Jiang disciples, leading them. When the horsemen left Lanling, they lost sight of the cultivators on swords as they entered the forests. As soon as they were far enough from Lanling, the formation they rode in broke up. Many disciples began to mingle, conversation adding a new sound to the clapping of hooves on the ground.

Lan SiZhui rode besides some Su and Yao disciples, not really paying attention to them. Soon he became aware of a new presence beside him and he looked up and over to the person riding next to him. Wei WuXian had his forearms braced on his saddle, looking ahead with a bored expression.

Since Wei WuXian didn't seem to want to talk, Lan SiZhui didn't start a conversation either. For a while they rode in companionable silence. Once a Jiang disciple rode up to them, asking something from Wei WuXian in a quiet voice. Wei WuXian answered with a simple gesture and the disciple nodded, riding off.

After this, Wei WuXian let out a theatrical sigh, sitting upright and stretching.

"All this riding is so boring! If I could only drink some, but Sect Leader Jiang forbid it." He whined, massaging his lower back. "Sect Leader Jiang forbids a lot of things lately. It's so boring. I can't imagine how you live by these rules all the time in the Cloud Recesses."

"It is not that hard if you're used to it." Lan SiZhui shrugged. "I've lived most of my life by the rules, and my adoptive father wasn't too strict either, so I had it easy."

"So, if you ever find yourself not having to follow the rules, would you?" Wei WuXian asked in a forced casual tone, peering at him curiously. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked over at him. Wei WuXian shrugged. "Ah, SiZhui, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi stopped at Lotus Pier when they went looking for you. Naturally, we spoke."

"I follow the rules." Lan SiZhui answered, turning ahead. "You said Jin Ling and Lan JingYi stopped by Lotus Pier, when was this?"

"About a few days ago." Wei WuXian looked over with a frown. "Have you not met them?"

"I'm afraid they never arrived." Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"Hm." Wei WuXian made a thoughtful noise, then sighed softly. "I should've gone with them. I wanted to, but Sect Leader Jiang didn't want me to."

"They will be fine." Lan SiZhui said, not sure if he was trying to convince Wei WuXian or himself. "Sect Leader Lan said they are going to show up for the Crowd Hunt. We just need to believe that."

"Let's hope so." Wei WuXian nodded.

"Young Master Wei—"

"Didn't you already begin to call me brother Wei? Why so formal now?" Wei WuXian pouted. Lan SiZhui sighed.

"Brother Wei, you mustn't tell anyone about my situation with my Sect. Sect Leader Lan ordered everyone from the attending Lan disciples not to comment on it."

"I figured." Wei WuXian nodded. "So, what happened that you're here and keeping this a secret? Is this one of your strange things with JingYi and Jin Ling?"

"It isn't." Lan SiZhui said, then sighed. "While I was with the Wen, the Jin Sect attacked us. They said a 'friend of mine' sent letters telling Jin GuangShan that I was kidnapped by them and manipulated into staying with them. Brother Wei, I don't think you did it, but I must ask..."

“It wasn’t me.” Wei WuXian shook his head. “Wen Ning and Wen Qing are my friends. I wouldn’t betray them or you like this, ever.” He looked at Lan SiZhui fiercely and Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I’m sorry, but I had to ask. I also didn’t think you had anything to do with it.”

“But then, who could have been the one?” Wei WuXian asked thoughtfully. Lan SiZhui sighed, knowing he made a mistake in involving Wei WuXian.

“Please, don’t concern yourself with this. Sect Leader Jin is already investigating and I’m also looking into it. That’s plenty of people to figure it out.” He paused. “Instead, why don’t you tell me why Sect Leader Jiang is forbidding you so many things lately?”

“It’s not really that bad.” Wei WuXian frowned and shrugged. “And he’s doing it for my sake, so I should be grateful. He thinks the main Sects might set their sights on me because of my demonic cultivation, and so he wants me to lay low. He even suggested I don’t attend the Crowd Hunt. Thankfully, sister and Jiang Cheng could convince him to let me come.”

“It is smart, to not bring awareness to yourself right now.” Lan SiZhui agreed.

“I can take care of myself.” Wei WuXian scoffed. “It’s not like I’m the only one holding a Yin Iron shard and you seem to get into plenty trouble without this ever coming to the spotlight.” At this, Lan SiZhui almost stopped his horse.

Of course! When he couldn’t find his weapons when he woke up at Koi Tower, he just figured it was to prevent him from fighting. But what if...? Jin GuangYao was present at the last battle, so were some Nie disciples. While Nie MingJue didn’t tell anyone about Lan SiZhui having a shard, if he even knew, Jin GuangYao and the Nie disciples were not as careful. The Nie disciples might not have talked, for if they did, the cultivation world would already know about this.

But Jin GuangYao was known to hold secrets close to his chest. If he realized Lan SiZhui was still holding onto a shard, he could have told Jin GuangShan, or even acted on his own to get it. He was smart enough to conspire this plot, and Lan SiZhui also suspected him from the start, he just didn’t know the other’s motivation. He figured it would be about the three juniors coming from the future, but what if it had nothing to do with that?

What if Jin GuangYao was after the Yin Iron shard?

Lan SiZhui’s sword and guqin were still missing, he didn’t receive them. He figured he would get them back once they arrived to Phoenix Mountain, so he wasn’t worried, but now he was. If Jin GuangYao got the Stygian Tiger Amulet... What would he do with it?

“You figured out something.” Wei WuXian said next to him, shaking him out of his thoughts. “What is it? Tell me.” He asked eagerly, leaning towards Lan SiZhui, who pressed his lips together and shook his head. At Wei WuXian’s hurt look, he pointed to his ears. Wei WuXian pursed his lips and nodded. “Ah, alright then, if you don’t want to tell me, I won’t push.” He said a little too loud and theatrical to be convincing, though Lan SiZhui guessed he didn’t



want to be convincing anyways, as Wei WuXian winked at him. Lan SiZhui smiled at him, small and fond.

While he missed the people from the future, it was also undeniable that some things were slightly better in the past. Wei WuXian's behavior was also a bit better. It wasn't that Lan SiZhui didn't like Senior Wei in the future, but there was always something off, something a little forced and not quite right about his teasing and acting out. This was also why he figured many people didn't suspect Mo XuanYu was Wei WuXian at first – because even though his mannerisms and quirks were the same, Senior Wei always felt like he was putting on an act, even if he did so flawlessly.

This Wei WuXian felt more natural, as if in the future Senior Wei was trying hard to pretend that he was like his old self but missed a mark just a hair; but the true 'old self' was this. He was playful in a way that came from genuine joy, unbothered and unburdened. In the future Wei WuXian was trying to act like this, but he was not as unbothered by the things he now said he didn't mind. It wasn't that Wei WuXian of the past didn't experience grief and hardships, but he wasn't broken by them the same way Senior Wei was after sixteen years of death.

Senior Wei lost a lot and did not have time nor strength to get past these hurts, not that anyone expected him to. It was like Senior Wei expected himself to get over them and so he acted as if they didn't affect him, but because of this, some of his jokes missed that naturalness that would make them feel honest and this sometimes felt like Senior Wei was truly Mo XuanYu – an insane youth babbling nonsense.

Still, Lan SiZhui missed Senior Wei nonetheless. He was easier to talk to, a little more mature. Senior Wei was also a teacher. Lan SiZhui often benefited from his lessons and he learned effectively by his side and Lan SiZhui enjoyed that. Lan SiZhui sometimes wished he could have Senior Wei's maturity and knowledge merge with Wei WuXian's good spirit and youthfulness.

Shaking off these thoughts, Lan SiZhui smiled back at Wei WuXian and bowed briefly. "Thank you, brother Wei."

"So, have you met any girl who caught your eyes during your travels? Hey! Lan SiZhui, where are you galloping, I wasn't done with the question yet!"

## Exigency II.

The forests surrounding Phoenix Mountain were beautiful, but after more than ten hours of riding through them, Lan SiZhui couldn't really appreciate the sight. Lan SiZhui quickly forgave Wei WuXian for his question and they spent the remaining ride exchanging academic knowledge. Lan SiZhui never really had the opportunity to talk to Wei WuXian this way in the future. The man was a genius, that much he knew, but most of the time it had been Wei WuXian teaching them.

Now on the ride over Wei WuXian inquired Lan SiZhui about the Lan way of dealing with different creatures; Lan SiZhui in return asked Wei WuXian about his talismans and different tricks with spiritual and resentful energy. It turned out Wei WuXian was quite adept at the later as well, having been theorizing about its uses for longer than any of them suspected in the future.

"Brother Wei, how come you know so much about this?" Lan SiZhui asked hours ago, after Wei WuXian finished explaining to him his theory of reversing the effects of the spirit warding talisman, which Lan SiZhui knew to be spirit lure talismans in the future.

"Spiritual energy is energy. Resentful energy is also just energy. Why use one but not the other? I have had this opinion since I've learned about cultivation." He shrugged. "Lan SiZhui, the truth is, I grew up in YiLing, where the Burial Mounds are. I am familiar with resentful energy. There is so much energy in the Burial Mounds, but instead of using it, we seal it off. It's a huge waste of resources."

"But does the Jiang Sect not get mad at you for theorizing about this, like you have in Cloud Recesses?" Lan SiZhui asked with a frown. Wei WuXian crackled at that.

"Lan SiZhui, do you think I talk about this in Lotus Pier?" He smirked, a bittersweet smile appearing on his face. "I have once tried asking my teachers, when I first began to think about this. They were quick to shut me down. Ever since then I've realized that cultivators don't take kindly to innovative ideas like this. I've tried bringing it up in Cloud Recesses because it was supposed to be an academic heaven. I didn't know back then, just how conservative they also were. Lan QiRen reacted to my theory worse than my teachers in Lotus Pier."

"If great—If Grandmaster didn't react this way, what would you have done?" Lan SiZhui asked curiously. Wei WuXian pursed his lips in thought.

"I don't know. I never got that far with anyone before. I'd probably have been too shocked to talk about it anymore!" He laughed, like the thought delighted him greatly. "Can you imagine the stuffy Lan Sect being open to my ideas?"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui answered, keeping quiet. In the future, this was never an issue. Since the YiLing Patriarch's inventions had been integrated into the juniors' studies, they have not been bothered when Wei WuXian used resentful energy or wicked tricks. And, Lan SiZhui noted

sourly, when they were stuck in the Burial Mounds and Wei WuXian offered to distract the fierce corpses, nobody else had an issue with it.

“Ah, but what am I saying! You’ve also once been part of the stuffy Lan Sect and you were the one to bring this musical method to the daylight.” Wei WuXian leaned over to nudge his shoulder. Lan SiZhui smiled at him tightly.

“Please, don’t compare the two of us.” He said. At this, Wei WuXian crackled again, throwing back his head to laugh loudly.

“Lan SiZhui, how come you’re so delightful while you also grew up in the Cloud Recesses?! If we haven’t met during the lectures, I’m afraid my life would be so much more boring!”

“I had terrible influence in the first years of my life.” Lan SiZhui said with a secret little smile. Of course, Wei WuXian didn’t get the joke about his future self, but it didn’t matter. He laughed nonetheless.

“Lan SiZhui, I truly want to drink with you now, just to see how you’re like when you have had some cups of good wine! Your tongue is sharp and your wit is quick. I’m really glad to be able to call you my sworn brother.” He grinned at Lan SiZhui, who huffed.

“It wasn’t a proper ceremony.”

“Ah, you even bring home here. It’s like riding next to Jiang Cheng.” Wei WuXian grinned. Lan SiZhui gave him a smile. After that, the topic changed and they talked about things that have happened while they were apart.

They had discussions like this for hours, the surrounding disciples sometimes chiming in with a comment or another, sometimes groaning and asking them to go, speak somewhere else.

As they neared the Crowd Hunt camp grounds, a Jin disciple who came with them called out and the cultivators fell back into formation. Lan SiZhui kept riding by Wei WuXian’s side; after all, he had no disciple mates here and he didn’t belong to any Sect anyways.

It turned out soon that it didn’t matter where he rode. When they arrived, there was no one of importance waiting for them.

The camp grounds were nicely presented. As Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian left the cover of the woods, they saw there was a tasteful border done with light colored wood, decorated with the Jin Sect’s golden colors. The gates were open and seemed to only serve as a symbolic gesture, since they were secured open with heavy wooden posts. The tents placed around the grounds were expensive, white tents of the Jin Sect. They were different in design than the ones Jin ZiXuan brought with him to the Sunshot Campaign. They were more for comfort than practicality.

Reminded of the Jin Sect Heir, Lan SiZhui looked around. Some tents were open, many closed, servants hurrying to and fro but not in a desperate manner. Lan SiZhui could see the carriages that had departed from Lanling, carrying some other guests to the Crowd Hunt. So, if Lan SiZhui calculated correctly, everyone had arrived.

“Brother Wei, excuse me, but I must look around.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian nodded. “I’ll see you at the Greeting Ceremony. Hey, if you find Jin Ling and Lan JingYi, come to the banquet tonight and let’s have a drink!”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, though he was already distracted, scanning the camp grounds. As they dismounted their horses and were taken away, Lan SiZhui started ahead, walking through the tents, looking around.

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Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were not there. Lan SiZhui asked around for a long time, walking at a slow pace, watching every disciple that he spotted. Once or twice, he caught a movement or voice he thought belonged to one of his friends, but it was always someone else. Lan SiZhui began to worry.

Lan JingYi and Jin Ling departed from Cloud Recesses a few days ago. Lan SiZhui had also been taken a few days ago, or so he assumed. He didn’t actually know how long he was out from the knock on his head. Thinking about this, he decided to look for one of the more important Jin, but when he asked a servant where he could find them, he got the answer they were overseeing preparations and were not to be disturbed.

Lan SiZhui felt like hitting his head on a wall. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling had been gone for a week and nobody knew where they were. Everyone had an idea, but this information was either outdated or uncertain and so Lan SiZhui couldn’t trust it. What ifs began to swirl around in his thoughts and he began seeking out other Jin to ask after his weapons now. If it came to it, he needed to be ready.

“ChunYu-Jun, excuse me, but I’m just a simple servant, I don’t know anything about your possessions.” One of the servants bowed deeply to him. Lan SiZhui was sick of this answer. He felt like he was back at Buddha’s Feet and never receiving any real answers to his questions.

Why did Lan JingYi and Jin Ling even go to get him? They should’ve trusted him to handle himself. Though he supposed the Jin attack proved he couldn’t. Still, he left Lan JingYi in good conscience, thinking he would listen and stay in Cloud Recesses. Jin Ling was impossible to control, so he didn’t expect anything else, but he still expected him to be more reasonable.

He knew this frustration came from worry, so he took a few deep breaths and pushed down his feelings. It would not help to blame his friends or the poor servant. Lan SiZhui needed to get his head straightened and figure out what was next.

He would attend the Crowd Hunt to appease Jin GuangShan. Then he would demand to go to the prison where they kept the Wen. After he talked to Wen Qing and Wen Ning, he would need to convince everyone not to kill them. Only after this could he look for Jin Ling and Lan JingYi. For now, they would need to manage on their own.

Lan SiZhui asked instead after his own tent and in this, the servant was enthusiastically helpful, bringing Lan SiZhui over. Inside he found a cozy room, much unlike his tents during the Sunshot Campaign. There was a low table set up inside, with tea and decorations. An extravagant, but comfortable-looking bed was set up near one wall, while on the other side a privacy screen had been set up.

More importantly, there was a guqin and a sword stand, neither empty. A great weight rolled off of Lan SiZhui's shoulders when he recognized Yingjiu on the sword stand and Hudie on the guqin stand. Instincts took him to his sword first, checking it to make sure no harm had been done to the blade. He pulled it out, examining it, but found it not worse for wear than the last time he saw it. It was also polished and oiled; the Jin Sect had taken good care of it.

Then came Hudie. The Jin Sect was not as knowledgeable about the caring of guqin, so Lan SiZhui didn't expect it to have any alterations. However, the moment he picked up the guqin, Lan SiZhui knew there was something different about it.

Even though Lan SiZhui had no access to his spiritual energies right now, they were there in his body and they reacted to his spiritual weapons. Every cultivators' spiritual energy was different and so Lan SiZhui could tell there was nothing different about Yingjiu. However, this also meant he could tell there was something wrong with Hudie.

It wasn't too noticeable, perhaps, if Lan SiZhui wasn't looking for flaws, he wouldn't have noticed it. But since he was looking for flaws, he did. Hudie's natural bond to the Stygian Tiger Amulet made the Yin Iron almost impossible to detect at first in the guqin's energies. This was why Lan JingYi didn't notice anything strange with it after the Sunshot Campaign. Now though as soon as Lan SiZhui touched the guqin, he could tell there was something dark lingering under the surface.

Lan SiZhui did not know how the Yin Iron or the Stygian Tiger Amulet worked. He was never in the possession of either, so he didn't know the nature of these tools. For all he knew, this was natural for the Yin Iron to begin leaking resentful energy after a while. Still, he doubted that was the case. He hadn't used Hudie the entire time he was in the Wen village and he never experienced anything like what he was now. It was strange and scary, and also alarming.

He sat behind the guqin and watched it for a moment before placing his fingers on the strings. He hesitated only a moment, then played a short command, not calling for any resentful energy, just the Yin Iron. The Stygian Tiger Amulet's half slowly materialized, vibrating with a restless energy. Lan SiZhui couldn't tell why.

Before he could keep going, hurried footsteps approached his tent, and he looked up, expecting Jin Ling or Lan JingYi to finally show up. However, instead of coming inside, the footsteps stopped right in front of his tent and an unknown voice called out:

"ChunYu-Jun, the Greeting Ceremony is about to start! The Lan Sect is gathering at the gates."

Lan SiZhui paused, taking in the servant's words. Since he was not to attend the ceremony, as per Lan XiChen's request, he called out:

“Thank you. I’m not feeling well, so I’ll be staying here. Please, do not disturb me unless someone is looking for me.” He did not say who he expected to look for him.

The servant was quiet for a long moment, then he said: “Y-yes, ChunYu-Jun. Do you require a healer?”

“No, thank you.”

“Then I’ll be leaving.” The servant said, then hurried off.

Lan SiZhui returned to examining his guqin. The servant’s words shook him out of his concentration for a moment and as he looked back, the Stygian Tiger Amulet was vibrating softly, going around its axis in a slow, steady circle. Lan SiZhui frowned at this display.

To his best knowledge, the Stygian Tiger Amulet was supposed to stay dormant unless called for it. Now it seemed like it was present even if it wasn’t called for. Lan SiZhui couldn’t have it affect Hudie at all, because if so, people would notice the dark energies surrounding it. He would need to settle the resentful energies of the Stygian Tiger Amulet, or he would be in great trouble if he ever pulled out Hudie in public. Not only would people know he was using dark energies to cultivate, the secret of him having a piece of the Yin Iron would be revealed. He would become an even bigger target than he was now.

Positioning his fingers, Lan SiZhui began to play. He had no idea how *Cleansing* would affect the Yin Iron or Hudie for that matter, but he hoped that if he was not playing with spiritual energy, the effects would also be muted and he would cause no harm to either.

It took a while, probably the whole duration of the Greeting Ceremony and some more, if the voices outside the tent were any indicators. After a while, he felt a shift in Hudie’s energies and the resentful energy settled in, like a dormant beast waiting to be released. It was still not ideal, but it was better than before.

Lan SiZhui looked up and noticed it was dark – so more than the Greeting Ceremony, the day had passed as well. Wei WuXian had asked Lan SiZhui to be at the banquet later that day, but Lan SiZhui didn’t feel like socializing and he told the servant he wasn’t feeling well either, so he simply didn’t bother to go. If anyone needed him for anything, they would find him. Instead, Lan SiZhui went to sit on his bed in Lotus position and following Wen Qing’s earlier advice, began to meditate.

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The field where the Crowd Hunt began was not far from the camp, but still far enough that the Sects needed to walk for a short distance to get there. They were all separated into their own lines and called to present in front of the hosts – that was Lan SiZhui’s first sight at the location.

Richly embroidered drapes swayed in the wind, set up all around the field, all major Sects’ emblem presenting. The most dominant color, of course, was the gold of the Jin Sect. There was a watchtower placed to the entrance, where the important guests, who would not

participate in the hunt, could watch the competition. There were also lanterns placed all over, providing illumination for the night. Across the gates were targets set up.

There were two wooden platforms built onto the field, one for the major Sects' emblems, one for the dais. As the major Sects were announced and led onto the field by their Sect Leader – or in the Jin's case, by the heir – the servants moved in front of the wooden platform across the dais, the head disciples in front of them. The Sect Leaders – except Jin GuangShan, who was reportedly busy with some matters and would join them a little later than expected – took their place on the dais, servants pouring them tea.

Since Lan SiZhui was no great archer, he didn't stand with those who would participate. He stood to the side, watching as each Sect's chosen competitors lined up. Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian stood side-by-side, clearly a show of confusion of who should participate. Formally, it was the head disciple's shot that would determine the Sect's rank in the Hunt, but even the Nie Sect stood two people there, a man Lan SiZhui distantly remembered from the war standing beside Nie HuaiSang. Jin ZiXuan also didn't arrive alone, a disciple Lan SiZhui vaguely recognized was by his side.

The Sect Leaders had led the disciples onto the field, so they were already on the dais, waiting, just like everyone else, for the host. Jin GuangShan only showed up a while later, and his wife, her servants, Madam Yu and Jiang YanLi followed him. Lan SiZhui saw Wei WuXian greet Jiang YanLi, then shy away as Madam Yu glanced at him. He was still grinning though and Jiang YanLi was chuckling into her fan as they passed.

Once they stepped up to the dais, the present Sect Leaders also stood and greeted the guests. They were still just taking their seats, when Jin GuangYao showed up by the entrance, holding up his robes to hurry over to the dais. He greeted his father and the guests with deep bows, then leaned close to whisper something to Jin GuangShan. Jin GuangShan didn't seem happy about whatever he said, then waved a dismissive hand and nodded towards the crowd: it was time to begin.

Jin GuangYao quickly fixed his clothes before stepping in front of the disciples. He was dusty as if he was on the road for some time before arriving here, not even having time to change clothes or bathe. Lan SiZhui wondered where he came from.

However, he didn't have much time as Jin GuangYao began to talk. He began reciting the rules of the archery competition, but Lan SiZhui only listened with half an ear. He was looking around, searching for his friends' familiar faces in the crowd.

“...The closer your arrow is to the bull's eye, the easier the way will be. And this year, we have designed a special activity to delight our guests.” Jin GuangYao's voice changed as he said this, pulling Lan SiZhui's attention away from his search. He looked over, just like everyone else, wanting to see what was different, although Lan SiZhui had never been to a Crowd Hunt before.

As far as his studies went, the Jin Sect had made attempts at the occasion for a few years after Jin Ling's birth. However, after this particular year, not many were interested in the event and so this tradition had been put to rest. The Jin Sect had been trying to entertain the cultivation world with different events, but Lan SiZhui was never required to participate on them.

As Jin GuangYao gestured to someone close to the targets, they could hear voices getting closer. Lan SiZhui strained to see from his spot, craning his neck. He needn't to wait long until he saw the people arriving in front of the targets.

Eight people were led there by six Jin cultivators. There were three women dressed in the high ranking clothes of the Wen Sect, their robes once had been bright red, now they were muddy and torn. They were cultivators from Wen RuoHan's court. The other five people were dressed in dark robes, once probably black, now they were grey and hard to identify. Lan SiZhui still recognized them as high-ranking servants from also Wen RuoHan's court.

"Go!" A guard grunted to them loud enough that even Lan SiZhui could hear their voices as they herded the Wen in front of the targets.

"Hurry up!"

"Hurry up!"

"Go!"

The crowd gathered began to murmur, some people frowning, some smiling. Lan SiZhui felt his throat tighten at the state of these people. They were most likely captures from the Sunshot Campaign, held in conditions that they got in this state. He glanced over at the main Sects' participants, but only saw the back of their heads as they were also watching the people. Then he felt someone watching him and looked over at the dais, seeing Lan XiChen looking directly at him. As Lan SiZhui met his gaze, Lan XiChen pressed his lips together and gave a barely-there shake of his head as a warning.

"If someone stood before the target, it would be more difficult to hit it." Jin GuangYao's voice cut through the murmurs and whispers of the people. Lan SiZhui looked over at him sharply. "Your skills shall be tested then." Lan SiZhui's fingers itched to call forth Hudie and take revenge on these people for this.

He looked over and saw Wei WuXian being held by the wrist by Jiang Cheng, his head tilted down, while Jiang Cheng was whispering something furiously to him. Wei WuXian seemed ready to shake off Jiang Cheng and fight Jin GuangYao also, but then Jiang Cheng said something and his muscles relaxed, and he raised his head, his face in a disgusted frown as he looked at Jin GuangYao. Then he looked away from the dais and looked straight towards Lan SiZhui. With an inclination of his head, he smiled at Lan SiZhui, who was confused by this.

"It's not difficult at all." A new voice suddenly said and Jin ZiXuan stepped out of the line. He hesitated for a moment, looking at Jin GuangYao with an unreadable expression, then Jin GuangYao smiled and nodded, signaling his consent to Jin ZiXuan stepping up.

A servant followed Jin ZiXuan towards the mark where the competitors would need to shoot from, holding Jin ZiXuan's own bow.

Jin ZiXuan stopped there for a moment, turning his head to the side for a glance at something, then he held out his sword to be taken, which the servant did, then he handed Jin



ZiXuan his bow and a single arrow. Jin ZiXuan didn't hesitate then. He suddenly began to move, leaping into the air. Lan SiZhui had to admit he was slightly impressed.

To hover in the air without a flying sword required not only a huge amount of spiritual energy, but also great skills and air-tight control. If Jin ZiXuan's concentration wavered even for a fraction of a second, he would fall, disgraced. However, Jin ZiXuan didn't seem worried as he already drew the bow and aimed. He released the arrow without properly aiming – probably the result of the strain he was currently taking from his performance.

The arrow flew true, far above the heads of the Wen who stood there. The arrow was aimed at the middle target, which it hit with good accuracy in the innermost circle. This was an impressive shot, and not the least safe for the Wen standing there as well. Lan SiZhui watched as the Wen still got frightened, crouching to avoid the danger. Some of the guards went up and pulled them up.

Jin ZiXuan got down to the ground almost immediately after the shot, reclaiming his sword. He looked self-satisfied as he trotted back to his own place – if Lan SiZhui wasn't so angry and anxious, he would have also been impressed.

As Jin ZiXuan arrived back, the Jin cultivator next to him stepped out of the line, calling out:

“Whoever wants to take on the challenge, just step forward. I'm looking forward to seeing who will have a better shot than that.” Lan SiZhui faintly recognized the voice, but he had difficulty placing it. The man's words caused an uproar, many participants murmuring and whispering to each other about the show of strength they've just seen. “Anyone else?” He called out, and nobody really answered.

There was a pause, and Lan SiZhui could see Wei WuXian whispering something to Lan Wangji. Then, he stepped forward, looking over at Lan SiZhui's direction. He lifted Chenqing, waving it at Lan SiZhui, then turned and with wide, confident strides, headed towards the marker.

Lan SiZhui's stomach tightened, but of all the people who could've gone, he was glad it was Wei WuXian. This little wave he just received, Lan SiZhui suspected was to reassure him. However, he didn't truly know what he needed reassurance from until Wei WuXian stepped up to the marker.

He stopped and paused for a moment there before putting Chenqing away into his sash, where on the other side Suibian was already hanging. He then began to tinkle with something on one of his hands – Lan SiZhui couldn't see what it was, until Wei WuXian stretched the fabric of his wrist guard cushioning over his head. Lan SiZhui from his angle at first thought he was tying it on like a poor mockery of the Lan Sect's headbands, but then Wei WuXian turned his head, so Lan SiZhui could see that the cloth was over his eyes.

Lan SiZhui's stomach tightened even more and he sucked in a sharp breath, much like people around him in surprise. Lan SiZhui could see Jiang Cheng whisper to someone at the crowd, then a Jiang servant rushed to Wei WuXian, holding a Jiang issued bow and a full quiver of arrows. He gave the bow to Wei WuXian when he held out his hand for it, while almost unnoticeably whispered something to Wei WuXian, who seemed to listen intently.

Wei WuXian pulled out his arrows, five of them. Lan SiZhui felt like he couldn't watch, but couldn't look away either. Wei WuXian then nodded, and the servant retreated three or four steps. There was a period of no one moving, while Wei WuXian was seemingly listening to something. The audience waited with their breath held back, then suddenly, Wei WuXian turned, making a full circle while notching his arrows and pulling up the bow, then as he arrived to the beginning position, he stopped, then released the arrows, sending them flying true at the targets.

Lan SiZhui never had any doubts about Wei WuXian's skills, but if he ever had any, they came to the surface now as he watched five arrows flying through the air, straight towards their target. They flew over the Wen's head, who cringed low, and they hit the target with such a force, even Lan SiZhui could hear the impact.

After a moment of shocked silence, the crowd began to cheer. Wei WuXian pulled off his blindfold, looking at his work, then he turned, heading back to his spot.

Before the cheers could really start and he got back, however, there was the sound of a bowstring snapping and another arrow hitting the target just as hard as Wei WuXian's. He spun back around, looking at where a red-feathered arrow notched itself right above his own in an angle where the tip of the red-feathered arrow shared the same puncture hole as Wei WuXian's.

There was the sound repeated four more times, a new arrow in each target, sliding next to Wei WuXian's arrows. Shocked silence settled on the audience as another two snaps could be heard and two arrows, infused with a small amount of yellow spiritual energy hit the chains holding the Wen prisoners in place, making the links explode, making the chains fall to the ground.

Lan SiZhui did not even register this before everyone turned to look towards the entrance of the archery grounds. Lan SiZhui looked as well.

Two people in light clothing hovered above the gates, huddled close on a spiritual sword. The figure in golden clothing stood at the tip of the sword, while the white-clothed figure stood closer to the handle, concentrating great amounts of spiritual powers to stay in the air. As the trick shots were finished, they shuffled closer to each other in a practiced manner, then the person flying the sword aimed it to lower onto the ground. One of them began to speak before they even touched the ground.

"The Jin Sect must be confused if they think this is entertainment!" He called out, his voice arrogant and full of himself as ever. "There is no honor in shooting at defenseless people, and if I were the Jin Sect's chosen archer, I would feel insulted if my Sect thought I wouldn't be able to shoot without injuring them."

Lan SiZhui felt a swell of pride and an indescribable amount of relief at those words. He didn't rush to their side though, not wanting to ruin the two boys' moment of entrance.

"Ah, MouShi, Feng CiKe, you're here." Jin GuangYao said, recovering from his shock quicker than the others. Jin Ling just glared back at him, and so Jin GuangYao said: "MouShi, the point of this practice was not to insult anyone's skill, but to test it." He paused.

“Naturally, we were assured the cultivators here would be able to do this, but for the sake of the less archived participants, we wanted to offer entertainment.”

Jin Ling snorted, stopping just on the edge of stepping in front of the dais, forcing the Sect Leaders and Jin GuangYao to turn in order to see him.

“As I said, the Jin Sect must be confused if they think this is entertainment. Even a small child would not be impressed by this. We’ve fought a war against these people. Give them bows and arrows and I’ll give you credit as well.”

Jin GuangYao smiled tightly, uncomfortable. “Naturally, this was only the opening shooting. It is to warm you up.” He paused and turned to everyone else. “Of course, you all are qualified to participate. So how about canceling the opening ceremony?”

Jin Ling snorted again. “Jin GuangYao,” he was clearly uncomfortable saying the name, “you are so diplomatic, cancelling the whole thing because you got humiliated by the—by Wei WuXian.” He shook his head. Jin GuangYao pressed his lips together in annoyance, but Jin GuangShan behind him stood before he could say more, stepping down to his son’s level to address Jin Ling.

“MouShi, didn’t you just show Wei WuXian that the Jin Sect houses more talented archers than him? Why would we feel humiliated, when we have MouShi on our side?”

“My shots were not in the Jin Sect’s name.” Jin Ling frowned, disgusted.

“Then in whose name were they?” The other Jin cultivator by Jin ZiXuan’s side asked.

“My own.” Jin Ling informed him arrogantly. “Naturally, my skills are my own and have nothing to do with neither Sect.” He said proudly. Lan SiZhui could see from his spot as Lan JingYi rolled his eyes and he repressed a smirk.

“Who taught you then, to shoot like that?” Jiang Cheng asked, and it must’ve been a great coincidence that he was the one who asked this. Jin Ling turned a shade red Lan SiZhui haven’t seen in a while and sputtered:

“You—You, it’s none of your business!” He said, eyes wide and frantic with denial. Behind Jin Ling, Lan JingYi bowed his head and snorted into his fist. Jin Ling made an abrupt gesture to hit him with his bow without even looking at Lan JingYi, but the other boy stepped out of Huangfeng’s range.

“Anyhow, there is no need to take offense in this little show.” Jin GuangYao said. “Why don’t you start the hunt now instead?” He smiled at the participants. People murmured, many agreeing, others complaining, but nobody else spoke up.

“I agree. Enough of this.” The familiar Jin cultivator said, then gestured to his mates and headed out of the archery field without further comment. Lan SiZhui watched as the other Sects’ people followed. Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi hesitated, only after receiving a dismissive gesture from their Sect Leaders did they go.

“MouShi, Feng CiKe, you’re both welcome to join the hunt as well.” Jin GuangShan told them with a smile. Jin Ling huffed, annoyed, turning and heading outside as well, while Lan JingYi bowed to the Sect Leaders before jogging away to catch up with Jin Ling. As the crowd where Lan SiZhui stood also began to move, he slid between the bodies to follow his friends.

He caught them lingering just outside the gates, discussing in hushed, urgent tones.

“...why would he join them?” Lan JingYi asked and Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“Because he is Lan SiZhui and he adores the Lan Sect even more than you.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Lan SiZhui smiled and stepped up to them. Lan JingYi immediately exclaimed and jumped to hug him around the neck, while Jin Ling scoffed, shuffling to the side.

“Lan SiZhui!” Lan JingYi exclaimed into his ear. “I missed you! You told me you would write often, yet you haven’t sent a single letter.” He pulled away, looking at Lan SiZhui disapprovingly.

“I did.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “Ah, but perhaps we should talk about this somewhere else.”

“I agree.” Jin Ling looked over at the archery field, where the Sect Leaders were gathering in front of the dais, speaking amongst themselves, preparing to move to the watchtower. “There are too many ears listening.”

“Mn.” Lan JingYi nodded, then looked around. “Should we go to the camp?”

“I must participate the hunt.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. Lan JingYi’s eyes widened and Jin Ling scoffed.

“Did they force you to?”

“Not exactly.” Lan SiZhui made a face. “Let’s say it was strongly suggested.”

“Mn.” Lan JingYi nodded, looking back at the archery grounds, then taking hold of Lan SiZhui’s arm. “Then let’s get going. We have a reputation to uphold, we cannot finish the hunt without any trophies to our names.”

“Since when do you have a reputation?” Jin Ling asked biting as they began to walk towards the path.

“If you do, why can’t I have one?” Lan JingYi asked back and Jin Ling fumed.

“You—”

Lan SiZhui couldn’t help himself, he laughed out loud, so happy and relieved his friends were here, safe and the same old.



“Alright, Lan SiZhui, you start.” Jin Ling said as they walked the mountain path, not really caring about the hunt at all. “First, there’s no word from you for weeks, then I get a message that you’ve left. What should I make of all this?” Jin Ling scoffed. “And then you don’t even answer my messages, nor JingYi’s – are we that unimportant in the face of your birth family?”

“Of course not!” Lan SiZhui denied quickly. “Ah, Jin Ling, I’m afraid there is a serious plot behind all of this.” He said sadly, sighing.

“Tell us.” Lan JingYi prompted, sounding curious and eager.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded and proceeded. He told his friends about Dafan Mountain, about his short life in the Wen village, about his suspicions and misfortunes with the letters. Lan JingYi began frowning halfway but didn’t cut in, while Jin Ling listened with his lips pressed together from the start. When Lan SiZhui got to the attack, finally his friends commented.

“What do you mean he said ‘your friends sent a letter’?” Jin Ling scoffed. “We would never say that to anyone, much less to the Jin.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I figured. After this, I was knocked out and brought into Koi Tower. For a while, they didn’t let me talk to Jin GuangShan, then finally he received me and managed to tell me about this in more detail. He said he thought the letter came from you, but to confirm, he wanted to bring it out. The servant he fetched for this job said the letter was missing and they began an investigation in the matter. There had not been news of it ever since.”

“That is highly suspicious.” Lan JingYi said unexpectedly. Lan SiZhui raised questioning eyebrows, but he shook his head. “Finish, then we will tell you.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui then told them about his missing weapons and that he got them back only once they arrived to the Crowd Hunt camp grounds.

“And was there anything amiss with them?” Lan JingYi asked, sounding tense. Lan SiZhui hesitated, then admitted:

“Hudie’s energies were confused and the resentful energy of the Stygian Tiger Amulet was leaking.”

“Then I wasn’t mistaken.” Lan JingYi told Jin Ling, who nodded. Now Lan SiZhui was incredibly curious.

“What happened to the two of you?” He asked and Jin Ling began to talk.

“After I haven’t received an answer from you, I wrote JingYi. He told me he also haven’t received word, but we should be more patient, after all, you must be busy. We waited for a while, but after a few weeks it started to become worrying that you haven’t answered. I wanted to go to Dafan, wrote about it to JingYi, who said he would come with me, so we met up in Cloud Recesses. When we got to Dafan, we found the Wen village almost abandoned.

We didn't know what happened but it seemed recent, so we asked around; the people said Jin soldiers came through a few days ago and took all the Wen.

"We went to Qiongqi to see if they were brought there. We didn't find them, but after spying around, we heard that not far from the prison camps, there was another set up in the past few days. We've decided to approach carefully at first, as to not raise suspicion."

Jin Ling paused, looking over at Lan JingYi, who took a deep breath.

"They are there. We saw Wen Qing and Wen Ning, both alive, tending to their people. They are not ideally kept, but as far as we could tell, they were unharmed." Lan JingYi also paused. "But that is not the reason why we came only now. While we were watching this other camp, we saw a familiar person there."

"Jin GuangYao?" Lan SiZhui guessed. Lan JingYi made a face.

"Not at first. Su She. He was carrying letters in his hand, but from where we were, we didn't see the paper. Now, I think it might've been our letters sent to you or yours sent to us." Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows but didn't comment. "We decided to stay for a while, see what he does. He left for a while and we were about to give up when Jin GuangYao came by as well, with Su She. He was carrying a guqin and I thought I recognized Hudie. They went inside the building and didn't come out for a long time. We stayed there for a few days, to see what else they do, and we also stayed initially because we thought you were also in that camp.

"Su She and Jin GuangYao came and went, sometimes together, sometimes separately. We heard guqin music from the building. Sometimes they came with letters. They never really talked to anyone. About two days ago Jin GuangYao showed up again, this time he seemed to be in a hurry. He went inside the building then came out with Hudie, then he left. We calculated that the Crowd Hunt would start soon, so he wouldn't return anymore and we thought we might sneak in to investigate what kind of work they were doing inside.

"Unfortunately, the building was heavily warded and we couldn't get past. We caught a random Wen walking around and we asked him if you were there in the camp at all, but he said you weren't. Since we didn't want to risk another war and have no idea where to even take them, we left the Wen there and came here, hoping that you would be present – if not, then we would've confronted Jin GuangYao in front of the Sects, hoping he would tell us where you were."

"You have been busy." Lan SiZhui concluded, still trying to process all this information. So, while Lan SiZhui was lying unconscious in Koi Tower, his friends had been spying on Jin GuangYao. They knew where the Wen were. Jin GuangYao was most likely trying to claim the Stygian Tiger Amulet and Su She most likely wrote that letter that got Lan SiZhui and the Wen in trouble.

This was a lot to take in and Lan SiZhui was proud of his friends for being able to gather this much information. Otherwise they would be left to create theories and theories had gotten them into plenty of trouble already. It was better to know these things for certain.

“You think Jin GuangYao is after the Yin Iron.” Jin Ling concluded. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure how he knew.

“Mn.” He nodded and Jin Ling returned the same gesture.

“Why does he need it now?” Jin Ling frowned. “He didn’t need it in the future either. It was Xue Yang who wanted it to deepen his demonic cultivation or whatever. But Jin GuangYao doesn’t need it.”

“What about Jin GuangShan?” Lan JingYi asked. “What if he was the one to order him to get it?”

“He would not have him work with someone like Su She, he would want to keep this in the Sect.” Jin Ling shook his head.

“Unless he’s smart and doesn’t want anyone from the Sect to be involved in it.”

“Jin GuangShan resents the Yin Iron.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “While I have no doubt you think he is evil, nothing supports the idea that he wants to gain power by demonic means. He is most likely to take the Sects into another war against anyone holding the Yin Iron than to claim to himself.”

“You’re being naïve again.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “You have no idea what people would do for power.”

“That’s true.” Lan SiZhui agreed, seemingly catching his friends off guard with his admission. “However, I believe Jin GuangShan has good intentions. He might have been trying to avoid conflict with Wen RuoHan, but that was because he wasn’t confident the Four Sects would win. From my understanding Jin GuangShan would not want to become common enemy. He is trying to keep everyone happy.”

“You don’t know that.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“I see it.” Lan SiZhui shrugged. “I don’t see how he would want to claim that kind of power to himself. It just doesn’t fit with his actions.”

“He sent soldiers for you and kept you locked up.” Jin Ling argued.

“He had good intentions in mind. He acted ignorantly but that doesn’t cancel his good intentions.”

“Lan SiZhui, after the events of the year before we came here, I wouldn’t be so sure.” Lan JingYi furrowed his brows. “After all, I’ve also never thought that Hanguang-Jun would team up with a demonic cultivator or that Sect Leader Jin could act so evilly.”

“I don’t know.” Lan SiZhui sighed. “I just feel like Jin GuangShan wouldn’t be part of this. I feel like Jin GuangYao is behind this, but I do not know why.”

“Nobody does.” Jin Ling huffed. “After all, he killed his sworn brother just because he was too suspicious of him. Who knows what are his motivations this time? Who cares? The

important thing is to stop him.”

“For once, I agree.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Whatever he’s planning, for whatever reason, we cannot let him destroy the cultivation world like last time again.”

“Then what is it we will do?” Lan SiZhui asked. “I still have the Wen to look after.”

“Aren’t they fine now?” Jin Ling frowned. “Just leave them there.”

“You know you’re speaking to Lan SiZhui, right?” Lan JingYi asked, so abruptly, and right after he slapped a hand across his mouth. The outburst wasn’t intentional and he looked at Lan SiZhui apologetically. “Sorry.”

“Ah, you’re right.” Lan SiZhui sighed. “Even if they’re safe now, I wouldn’t dare to leave them there, defenseless.”

“So, then, what’s your plan?” Jin Ling asked.

“Jin GuangShan said they would get a fair trial. He said I could be there.”

“And if the trial doesn’t go in your favor?”

Lan SiZhui remained quiet. He didn’t know. He didn’t even think that the trial would go any other way than the Wen being let free – after all, they were innocent. Those who fought, fought in self-defense, Lan SiZhui was sure of that. But Jin Ling was right. These things often didn’t go the way he wanted.

“Then we will free them.” Lan JingYi said. “Like Wei WuXian had done in the past.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Because that worked out so well for him.”

“I mean...” Lan JingYi shrugged. “For a while it had. The one month celebration, *your* one month celebration was the issue, not Wei WuXian hiding away the Wen.”

“No.” Jin Ling shook his head. “That was the reason why the Bloodbath happened. But up until then, how did the Wen and Wei WuXian live? I wasn’t alive at the time, so I don’t know much, but even I can see that the Burial Mounds are not a place to live. Besides the amount of resentful energy that is still there, nothing grows there that’s alive.”

“Jin Ling is right.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. “At the time, the only things we could grow were radishes. None of us had a good diet and many died of malnutrition. I remember once an older man collapsed on the field because he was so dehydrated. I don’t remember if he died or stayed alive.” He shrugged.

They were quiet for a long time, walking through the mountain paths – Lan SiZhui wasn’t even sure they were on the hunting grounds anymore.

“I truly don’t know what the best course of action would be.” Lan SiZhui admitted quietly. “I’m starting to think there is not even a course of events that would’ve stopped the Wen



from dying at the end. Short of helping them win the Sunshot Campaign, they were always going to die, no matter what.”

“I’m not sure I like that you think that way.” Jin Ling frowned. “But at least it is realistic. I say let them die. They died in the past as well. Nothing changes.”

“Wasn’t it you who fought so hard in the beginning to stop your parents from dying this time around?” Lan JingYi asked, glaring sharply at Jin Ling. “Why would you deserve that chance while Lan SiZhui didn’t?!”

“I—” Jin Ling began, then looked away, his face turning red. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You didn’t?” Lan JingYi demanded. “Then how did you mean it?!”

“Alright, that’s enough.” Lan SiZhui sighed. Jin Ling didn’t look at them and Lan JingYi glared at him until he got bored of it, huffed, and turned away.

“Ever since we’ve come here, we haven’t faced an issue we couldn’t fix. We will do this, even if we have to live in the Burial Mounds.”

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, but Lan JingYi didn’t let him finish.

“We didn’t know how we would find the Yin Iron shards and in the end we still figured it out. We didn’t know how we would stop Wen RuoHan and in the end we still did it.” Lan JingYi said. “It seemed impossible to change the past. But we’ve done it. Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu are alive. Wen RuoHan is dead and Wei WuXian didn’t crumble to demonic cultivation. We can save the Wen and we will.”

“We just don’t know how. At least, with the other things, we had help, because everyone else wanted it. Now, nobody wants the Wen to live. Who would help us? Sect Leader Lan and Sect Leader Nie could only help so much, tied by diplomacy. Wei WuXian has his original Sect Leader, the one he actually listens to. Not one Jin wants to see the Wen live, because they remind Jin GuangShan of his failure to join the Sunshot Campaign in time and Jin ZiXuan and his people want to see them die because they’re their enemy. What would you have us do? Go against the entire cultivation world just to save some unworthy ones?” Jin Ling glared at Lan JingYi, who glared back.

“Didn’t Wei WuXian do the same? If he could, why couldn’t we? We don’t really take any real risks in this world. Sooner or later we’re going to return home and all this will be forgotten.”

“Unless this is our future.” Lan SiZhui noted. “Everything we do here affects our future, doesn’t it?” He looked between the two of them. “Have you ever thought what world would we return to? What we would become there?”

“What do you mean?” Jin Ling frowned. Lan SiZhui huffed.

“They know us here now. We have a great reputation. You’re MouShi, one of the best tacticians of the Sunshot Campaign and master of Huangfeng, the first spiritual bow of my

knowledge. Lan JingYi is Feng CiKe, the one who killed Wen RuoHan and ZeWu-Jun's right hand. And I also have reputation. They know our faces. Those people who are our seniors in the future, they're here right now, hunting on these mountains. If we return to the future, people will know we were not originally from here. They would speak of time travel. They would attempt it, some of them would even accomplish it."

"So, what?" Jin Ling made a face.

"So, what if someone who doesn't wish you to live comes back and kills your parents before they even married? What if someone worse than Wen RuoHan wishes to wield the Yin Iron comes back and claims it?"

Jin Ling looked away with a dismissive expression.

"Lan SiZhui, you're the academic. I have no care for such things."

"You should. It is not just a distinct possibility." Lan SiZhui paused. "Anyhow, that is not the point. The point is that we cannot start acting recklessly. This is still very much a time we live in that affects our future."

"So, you're saying what I could already guess: you don't want to forcibly remove the Wen from the Jin's hold."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui confirmed. Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

"Lan SiZhui, then decide what to do, or we will leave them to their fate. We have other, bigger things to worry about."

"Hey!" Lan JingYi glared. "Lan SiZhui never claimed to care about your parents, and he still helps you with that. Don't be rude to him in return."

"I'm not trying to be rude." Jin Ling argued. "I'm trying to get an answer from Lan SiZhui as to what he's planning to do, because unless we trust Jin GuangShan and a fair trial, they *are* going to die."

"I truly don't know what we could do." Lan SiZhui admitted. "If I were on my own, I would attempt taking them like Wei WuXian had. I have better resources and I'm better prepared what life would be like in the Burial Mounds."

"But you're not on your own." Lan JingYi said sharply. Lan SiZhui nodded.

"Yes, that is the issue."

Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were quiet for a long time, sharing some brief glances.

"Anyhow." Jin Ling sighed. "How about we figure out what to do with Jin GuangYao, until you figure out how to save the Wen?"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui agreed and fell in thought. It was good to distract himself from thinking of the Wen. As he told them, if he was on his own, he wouldn't hesitate to take those steps. He

didn't belong to the Lan Sect anymore, even if he pretended right now. He would not have to face such serious consequences if he did what Wei WuXian did. After all, that was the whole point of leaving the Lan.

But Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were not the type to let him do this on his own. For all Jin Ling complained and argued, if Lan SiZhui decided to do this, he would go with him, even if just to tell him what a terrible idea it was. Lan JingYi was also endlessly loyal. With him, Lan SiZhui worried more. Jin Ling was independent enough that he wouldn't mind leaving the cultivation world just to show them he could. But Lan JingYi wasn't like that. He liked the cultivation world. He liked working with ZeWu-Jun and living in the Cloud Recesses.

"Well, he wants the Yin Iron, but he's also working in secret. Why not expose his crimes to the Sects?" Lan JingYi asked. "If Lan SiZhui tells everyone the state he got his guqin back, that someone tried to summon resentful energy with his guqin, the Jin Sect would need to admit that someone who had access to their secure chambers got hold of the guqin to take to experimenting."

"But that doesn't mean it was Jin GuangYao." Jin Ling shook his head. "It could've been an ambitious servant. It could've been a thief who heard Hudie was held in Koi Tower."

"Ah." Lan JingYi was disappointed. Lan SiZhui as well, although he wasn't excited to blacken someone's name publicly.

"I say we kill him now, so he won't pose a problem in the future." Jin Ling said. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"That's a terrible idea." Lan JingYi said. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"You two are so squeamish when it comes to killing someone."

"And you're so not." Lan JingYi countered. "It's disturbing." Lan SiZhui privately thought Jin Ling liked the idea more than actually killing someone. He still remembered how he was like after he'd stabbed Wei WuXian. Before they arrived to the past, Jin Ling haven't killed anyone. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui often forgot because of their own age and Jin Ling's big mouth, but Jin Ling just recently turned seventeen. He was still just a junior with no serious life experiences before they arrived to the past. The war had helped him mature a bit and experience life, but he was still much too young.

"I think for now we should just watch Jin GuangYao closely. He will have a plan we do not know of. If he truly targeted the three of us, we should be cautious. In the end, he won't need us to free the Wen in order to make us appear the enemy in the eyes of the cultivation world."

"Great. So, we do nothing. Again." Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. Lan SiZhui sighed.

"It's not so much that we do nothing. We're waiting him out. As a tactician, you must understand the importance of that."

"I'm still not a tactician." Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Sure you are. You’re a Jin, after all. It’s in your blood.” Lan JingYi said.

“You—!” Jin Ling raised his bow threateningly and Lan JingYi laughed out loud, even as he danced away to avoid the hit.

“Me, me, even your ancestors see this trait of yours, after all, Madam Yu gave you the title MouShi!” He said in a melodic tone.

“I’ll break your legs and use you as bait to the beasts on this mountain!”

“See? You can’t help yourself! Always coming up with plans!”

“Hey! Slow down, so I can break your leg properly!”

Lan SiZhui watched, amused, as his friends ran ahead, Lan JingYi laughing loudly as Jin Ling followed with shouted threats. He thought the two of them could probably scare any monster away from any mountain, but he let them play for now. It was good to have the two of them back again. Lan SiZhui missed them.

### Exigency III.

Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling didn't really do all that much hunting. Jin Ling and Lan JingYi entertained Lan SiZhui with their play, occasionally stopping to talk a little, but it was never about much serious things. They asked how it was like in the Wen village, while Lan SiZhui asked them how it was like at home, and at Qiongqi. Jin Ling was tight-lipped about his time away from them, though he reassured them there was nothing serious happening over there – he was simply not doing much, other than practice and stand watch.

After a while Lan SiZhui observed they were getting closer to the path leading down the mountain and the three of them agreed to go to the entrance and wait for the others there. The forests were colorful at this time of the year, leaves already turning yellow and falling to the ground. As they walked, they heard distant voices from the path; so they weren't the only ones who decided to end their hunt quickly.

As the voices grew closer, the three boys quieted, not wanting to disturb any discussions. That was, until they heard Jiang YanLi's voice and Jin Ling's eyes widened, his grip on his bow tightening. He looked over at them.

"Does she sound upset?" He asked, voice tight. Lan SiZhui listened for a moment. He didn't hear her voice anymore, but he heard many male voices talking and recognized Wei WuXian's, who sounded angry.

"That's probably not a good sign." Lan JingYi said as they exchanged a look. Lan SiZhui nodded and so the three of them hurried towards the voices. As they arrived, they saw a group of people standing at a small clearing where paths crossed. The amount of Jin overwhelmed the three figures in the middle; Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian and Jiang YanLi.

Wei WuXian was facing away from much of the group, while holding Jiang YanLi close. In front of him stood that Jin cultivator Lan SiZhui found familiar earlier. Lan WangJi stood to the side, looking alert but not alarmed. Several other Jin stood around them, watching the drama.

As they arrived, they heard the Jin cultivator say:

"...Wei WuXian, you are so selfish and you never think about others. Aren't you too proud?"

Wei WuXian chuckled at that, stepping forward, intimidating the Jin cultivator to take a step back. Wei WuXian just peered at him, stepping past, facing away from them all. He said:

"You people have said that in the hunt capability talks. Why do you betray your own words?"

The Jin cultivator stepped in front of him, looking him in the face. "What you showed are just dirty malign tricks, not your own capability. You just play the flute. How can it be called a capability?"

“I didn't play any dirty tricks. Why can't it be my own capability?” Wei WuXian mocked, then held up his flute between them. He said something too quietly for the three of them to hear, and the Jin cultivator seemed to get upset at this.

“You broke the rules. It isn't any better than playing dirty tricks!”

“Fine. If I don't know what's called capability, then please show me yours.” Wei WuXian said, telling him something else quietly, that upset him once again.

“You—!” He didn't finish and for a long moment they just stood there, facing each other. Lan SiZhui looked towards his peers, then hurried forward.

“Young Masters, there's no need to fight.” He said, coming closer. Everyone turned to look at him and his friends, surprise on their faces, though it didn't help the tension in the air. The Jin cultivator frowned at him. Lan SiZhui stopped next to him and Wei WuXian and bowed. “Sir, Young Master Wei is using musical cultivation to bring the monsters to him and his Sect. Where do the rules say such methods are not allowed? If they do so, then please, punish me as well. I also used musical cultivation to night-hunt just now.”

The Jin cultivator glared at him with wide eyes and Wei WuXian snorted, shaking his head.

“ChunYu-Jun, don't involve yourself in a fight that has nothing to do with you.” The Jin cultivator said. Lan SiZhui shared a glance with Wei WuXian and caught Lan WangJi's eyes as well. He looked back at the Jin.

“Sir, since Young Master Wei and I play the same scores, I would like to know if I broke any rules as well.”

The Jin cultivator paused, watching him. Then he snorted. “Fine.” He nodded. “You want to place yourself on the same level as Wei WuXian? Fine.” He paused, looking around. “The Jiang Sect had really sunken low. They associate with not one but two demonic cultivators. One of them is even a Wen and a traitor. It bodes ill for Sect Leader Jiang, when he hears Wei WuXian associates with those who have betrayed the cultivation world just to protect some dirty Wen.”

Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows and heard Jin Ling begin to exclaim. However, he didn't need Jin Ling to fight this for him, so he held up a hand in the other's direction, turning to the Jin cultivator.

“Sir, what do you mean by that?” He asked, frowning.

“Everyone in Koi Tower knows how you were brought over there from the Wen village.” The Jin said. “You killed two Jin soldiers to protect the Wen. After the accusations in Nightless City, do you really think people believe the story you fabricated, that you've been manipulated into these actions?”

“Sir, perhaps you are the one who shouldn't involve yourself in matters that have nothing to do with you.” Lan SiZhui didn't usually act so rude, but the accusation was upsetting. He thought they were over this, but apparently not.

“Doesn’t it?” The Jin asked after a moment of looking at Lan SiZhui. “I have fought the war by your side and seen the things you did. Everyone seems to have forgotten what Wen Chao said on the steps of Scorching Sun Palace, but I haven’t. ChunYu-Jun, you’re a Wen and proved that you’re also willing to kill your own associates to protect them. Is the Jiang Sect associating with people like this? Should we be afraid of a new Wen RuoHan rising amongst them?”

“You—!” Wei WuXian began, but Lan SiZhui placed a hand on his arm, quieting him.

“Sir, it is unbecoming to insult the Jiang Sect based on this. I am not part of the Sect, so anything you say about me only has to do with me and not them.”

“Does it?” The Jin looked at him with wide eyes, gesturing between him and Wei WuXian. “Didn’t you just say anything I say about Wei WuXian’s methods has to do with you as well?”

“Are you really this stupid?” Jin Ling called out from behind them, but Lan SiZhui gestured him to keep quiet.

“You really think I don’t see how close these two became during the Sunshot Campaign? Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian are both demonic cultivators who want to see the Jin Sect fall. Instead of clinging to them like a child, you should be ashamed to associate with them.” He told Jin Ling. “A Wen and a son of a servant, they’re tired of their low status and want power instead. How am I the only one seeing this? Or are you all so afraid of them that you’re willing to overlook the threat they’re posing?”

Wei WuXian glared. “Demonic cultivation? Dirty malign tricks?” He was getting angrier, hand flexing under Lan SiZhui’s hold, clenching around his flute. Lan SiZhui tightened his hold, but Wei WuXian shook him off. “Do you want to know why we chose this path? It doesn’t matter. Even if you knew, you wouldn’t be able to beat us using the orthodox methods. Are you so intimidated by this that you rather hurl insults at us?”

“Wei WuXian, don’t be so arrogant. You are only the son of a servant. You can’t speak to me like this.”

Lan SiZhui suddenly felt cold and his fingers itched to pull out Hudie and order resentful energy to choke the Jin to death. When he looked down, he saw the qiankun pouch in his sleeve leaking resentful energy in faint black smoke. Next to him, Wei WuXian also began to shake, and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw him looking towards Hudie as well, his hand on Chenqing tightening.

Lan SiZhui breathed deeply, trying to rein in the resentful energy, but unless he pulled out Hudie and settled it with a score, he could only do so much. Lan SiZhui tightened his hold on Hudie, trying to concentrate, to shut out the quiet whispers of the resentful spirits around them and from the qiankun pouch.

He shivered, closing his eyes and clenching his hands in his sleeves. There was the sound of several footsteps, then a warm hand gripped Lan SiZhui’s arm. As he opened his eyes, he saw Lan JingYi looking at him concerned. Jin Ling on his other side glared at the Jin, as if he

could kill him with just a look, but he also pulled his bow off his back, now holding it pointed to the ground, his other hand holding an arrow, also pointed to the ground.

Lan WangJi also stepped forward, gripping Wei WuXian's arm, looking over at Lan SiZhui questioningly. Lan SiZhui swallowed and closed his eyes again, trying to empty his head from the violent thoughts. Lan WangJi must've understood, because he told Wei WuXian in low tones:

"Wei Ying, concentrate. Breathe."

The resentful energy didn't lessen, but it didn't grow either. Lan SiZhui felt the restlessness of them, felt their power and need. He heard whispers in his ears, the resentful spirits rising around them, but he couldn't make out what they were saying.

There was another set of footsteps, lighter, then a gentle, worried voice called out and Lan SiZhui felt that this helped calming the spirits. The voice was melodic and high-pitched, calming and gentle.

"A-Xian," he heard and Lan SiZhui opened his eyes, looking over, seeing Jiang YanLi on Wei WuXian's other side. "A-Xian, stand behind me." Wei WuXian also turned to her, eyes wide as he looked at her. Now that she got his attention, Jiang YanLi stepped forward, pushing Wei WuXian back. Lan SiZhui reached over and gripped his arm again. Wei WuXian looked over at him with wide eyes, but Lan SiZhui shook his head at the unasked question.

No, he also didn't know what had happened. He had a suspicion, but he would only say later, once they were in private. Lan WangJi also turned to face them, having let go of Wei WuXian, his gaze searching. Jin Ling followed his mother, stepping on her side, silent for once, still holding his bow, glaring at the Jin.

"Young Master Jin. You've just said that it is A-Xian who has taken thirty percent of the prey in Phoenix Mountain. You said he broke the rules, and he was too proud." She paused. "I... I don't know much about this. It may really cause some trouble for you. I will apologize to you all for him." She bowed properly, lady-like. Jin Ling twitched, but otherwise didn't speak or move.

"Sister!" Wei WuXian exclaimed, stepping forward, but Lan SiZhui held him back and Lan WangJi also stepped in his way. The Jin threw him an arrogant look, and Jiang YanLi slightly tilted her head in their direction, shaking it. Jin Ling also glanced back and rolled his eyes before turning back to the Jin.

The Jin laughed shortly. "Lady Jiang is really polite and decent and can tell what's right from wrong." He stepped around Jiang YanLi, who was still in a bow and Jin Ling, who turned with him but didn't step away from his mother. "What your little brother has done is indeed wrong and has caused some trouble." He paused and turned around. Jiang YanLi also rose from her bow. The Jin now faced Jin Ling and the back of Jiang YanLi. Jin Ling glared at him. "But there's no need to apologize for your and Sect Leader Jiang's sake. After all, the Jin Sect of Lanling and the Jiang Sect of Yunmeng are like family." Lan SiZhui tightened his hold on Wei WuXian's arm.



Jiang YanLi also turned and now Lan SiZhui also saw how fierce and mad her expression was. “However, although I haven't participated in the hunt before, I do understand that since ancient times until today, there isn't a rule in the hunt that forbids one participant to have too much prey. You just said that A-Xian broke the rules. I want to ask which rule A-Xian has just broken.”

“Lady Jiang, this may not be right!” Clan Leader Yao said, and Lan SiZhui blinked, trying to remember when he had showed up. He must've been standing there the whole time, amongst the crowd. “Although some rules haven't been written out, we all learn them in our hearts very clearly. Besides, we've been obeying the rules well.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling said, speaking for the first time in a strict voice. He truly sounded like a Sect Leader right now, speaking to another. “What you said is right. However, you are wrong about one thing.” He looked around. “As a Sect—” He stopped himself, looking annoyed. He worked his jaw, then continued.

“As a *disciple* of the Jin Sect, I had to study the history of these Crowd Hunts. There are no precedents, before Wei WuXian's catch, that a Sect would've taken too much prey. This means there had never been a rule or even the idea of a rule coming up in these situations. A disciple could act out of courtesy and not take all the prey, but if he is capable, isn't it his right to show off? Unless he humiliates another Sect with his actions, such as taking the prey from their hands and nets, he can do it.

“The Crowd Hunt is an event based on capability and equality. The Sects all enter knowing that there might be a disciple amongst their own or other Sects, who do better than them, and instead of taking offense, they're supposed to admire this ability and learn from this disciple's actions and hard work. This, however, is indeed within the rules, written down as the third rule of the Crowd Hunt events.”

“Since when do you know *rules*?” Lan JingYi frowned at him from Lan SiZhui's side. Jin Ling scoffed at him.

“Shut up. My uncle wanted me to know these things, so I had to learn.” He rolled his eyes, though the bitterness in his tone was underlined with some sadness. “It's not like I willingly learned them. Besides, at least these rules have a point, not like the stupid Lan rules. ‘*Don't breathe too loud*’, so stupid.”

“Maybe so.” A Jin disciple spoke up, frowning at Jin Ling. “However, there is not much prey in the hunting ground! No more than five hundred, right? How many participants are there? More than five thousand! It's already a hard competition! What's more, he has taken so much of the prey himself! Don't you agree?” He looked around, but before anyone could agree, Jiang YanLi said, angrily:

“It's not his fault that you can't hunt the prey! Capability talks in the hunt. Although A-Xian took a different method, he studied it with effort. You can't make the judgment that he practiced dirty malign tricks just because you can't hunt enough prey.” Then she took a pause and stepped forward, looking into the Jin cultivator's face. Jin Ling stepped forward as well, alarmed, his bow creaking as he flexed it a little.

“Besides, let's focus on the hunt, not our family education.” She said, not caring about Jin Ling’s actions. “A-Xian is a disciple of the Jiang Sect of Yunmeng who grew up with me and my brother. We're like real siblings. You referred to him as the son of a servant, which is unacceptable to me. Hence, I hope you, Young Master Jin ZiXun, can apologize to Wei WuXian from the Jiang Sect of Yunmeng.”

So, it was Jin ZiXun then. Lan SiZhui remembered now, he was also the one to speak up during the discussion conference in Nightless City against Lan SiZhui. He was Jin ZiXuan’s subordinate in the Sunshot Campaign, and also Jin ZiXuan’s cousin. He was the one who got cursed and triggered the events leading to the Bloodbath when he ambushed Wei WuXian at Qiongqi.

There was a wave of shock running through the crowd gathered around them. It was scandalous that a disciple, no matter how high-ranking in a Sect, demanded an apology from another. Between major Sects no less. If Jin ZiXun failed to apologize, he would insult the Jiang Sect greatly. However, if he did apologize, he would lose face not just for himself but for his entire Sect as well, admitting he had wronged the Jiang Sect through foolish words. He could be cast out of the Sect for this. There was no good choice to be made if he was thinking of his own status. If he was thinking of his whole Sect, there was a clear answer what he should do.

Before anyone could say or react any way, there were several footsteps hurrying down the path towards them. They heard the arrivals before they saw them, however.

“What is going on here?!” Lan SiZhui was familiar enough with this voice and tone to recognize it immediately. Next to him, Wei WuXian’s eyes widened and he took a step back. Jin Ling also took a step away from his mother, not much, but enough to be respectful.

As the arrivals stepped onto the clearing, everyone stopped and bowed.

“Madam Yu, Madam Jin.” They greeted.

“A-Li,” Madam Jin began as she stepped forward, taking hold of Jiang YanLi’s hands, “I thought you were going to walk with A-Xuan. Why are all these people here?”

“Mother,” Jin ZiXuan stepped forward, but before he could say a word, Madam Jin looked at him strictly.

“A-Li, did he bully you again? I’ll teach him a lesson.”

“Ah, it’s not his fault.” Jiang YanLi said quickly, glancing a look towards Wei WuXian. This also drew Madam Yu’s attention and she turned towards him, eyes sharp.

“Well? I asked what happened.” She barked. Lan SiZhui looked at Wei WuXian, who stood with his head bowed, so Lan SiZhui stepped forward and bowed to her.

“Madam Yu, please don’t blame Young Master Wei. It was actually Young Master Jin who started the fight.”

”How would you know?” Jin ZiXun scoffed. “You weren’t even here.”

“ChunYu-Jun, this has nothing to do with the Lan Sect. I asked my disciple, not you.” Madam Yu glared at him.

“You want to know what happened? I’ll tell you what happened!” Jin Ling stepped up to her, looking at her fiercely. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure he would’ve had the courage to do the same. “Jin ZiXun insulted the Jiang Sect and Wei WuXian argued on their behalf. The one you should be mad at is Jin ZiXun.” He pointed at the other.

“It is true.” Lan WangJi also voiced unexpectedly. Before anyone could say anything else, there was the approaching footsteps again and everyone turned to look. Lan SiZhui also looked over and saw Lan XiChen and Jin GuangYao appear. Lan WangJi hurried over as soon as he saw them, bowing and greeting his brother. He began to talk to him in low tones, while Jin GuangYao came forward.

“Friends! Why are you all gathered here? What happened?”

“You’re smiling? How can you still smile?” Madam Jin glared at him. “Look at the night-hunt held by you! Useless!” There was a pause when everyone looked pained by the scolding. Then Lan XiChen stepped forward, looking at Madam Jin, effectively saving Jin GuangYao from further humiliation.

“Madam Jin.” He bowed to her and she inclined her head, though she didn’t seem as pleasant as she should. “My brother tells me your nephew had caused great tension, not just personal but between three Sects as well.”

This did not bode well for the Jin Sect, and Lan SiZhui could see it on Madam Jin as well, that she recognized the political danger Jin ZiXun got them into. Madam Yu kept glaring at Wei WuXian.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun. Please, don’t listen to the useless crap my nephew speaks.” She placated, her tone gentling. “You see, he was always angry as a child and this followed him into this age as well.”

“How old is he now then?” Wei WuXian spoke up, frowning. “Ten?”

“You—!” Jin ZiXun glared. Jin Ling flexed his bow.

“Wei WuXian!” Madam Yu barked and everyone froze, turning to look at her, but she only kept her attention on Wei WuXian. “If you wouldn’t have given reason for Jin ZiXun to insult the Jiang Sect, would he still have done it?! Consider your words.” At this Wei WuXian blinked, as if he was surprised, then bowed his head again. Madam Yu turned to Lan XiChen next. “Sect Leader Lan, this does not concern the Lan Sect. Please, leave this matter to us.” She pointedly looked at Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui standing between her and Wei WuXian.

“Madam Yu, are you sure this doesn’t involve us?” Lan XiChen asked, also looking at his brother and Lan SiZhui. “Perhaps, someone could explain what had happened in a little more detail?” He looked around, his gaze stopping behind Lan SiZhui. “JingYi?”

“Mn.” Lan JingYi glanced at Lan SiZhui briefly, then stepped forward and bowed. “Sect Leader Lan, I’m afraid I don’t know the whole thing. We arrived not long ago ourselves. When we arrived, we heard Jin ZiXun and Wei WuXian arguing about the rules of the hunt. Then Young Master Jin made some remarks about who the Jiang Sect associates with, implying that Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian were demonic cultivators. Then he called Wei WuXian the son of a servant, and Wei WuXian took offense, so did Lady Jiang. Then Lady Jiang settled Wei WuXian’s tempers and argued with Young Master Jin herself, demanding an apology.” He said, summing it up as a night-hunt report. Lan XiChen paused, taking it in.

“Young Master Jin?” He asked for clarification.

“Jin ZiXun, Madam Jin’s nephew, Jin ZiXuan’s cousin.” Lan JingYi told him.

“What, exactly, did he say about Jiang Sect’s associates?” Everyone held their breath as Lan JingYi tried to remember. To fight amongst themselves was one thing, but Lan XiChen was a Sect Leader and Madam Yu and Madam Jin Sect heads; if they took offense, this could lead to more serious troubles. Lan SiZhui considered telling him to drop it, but he knew he shouldn’t go against his ‘Sect Leader’ in such fashion, so he waited for the answer just like everyone else.

“He said...” Lan JingYi frowned, looking down. “He said Young Master Wei is using evil tricks to capture the prey. At this, Lan SiZhui said he also used the same methods and wanted to know how they broke the rules. Then Jin ZiXun implied that Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian were both demonic cultivators who used evil tricks. Ah, he said... Will the next Wen RuoHan rise from the Jiang Sect, or something like that.” Lan JingYi shrugged. “I don’t remember that well.”

“He also spread the rumors that Lan SiZhui killed two Jin to protect the Wen, then blamed it on manipulation himself.” Jin Ling said. “While we all know it was the Jin Sect who fabricated the letters that took the Jin to the Wen village in the first place.” He glared at Jin GuangYao, his hand tight on his bow. “Lan SiZhui killed in self-defense and the Jin had no right to do what they did.”

Lan XiChen blinked. Jin GuangYao seemed frightened, though Lan SiZhui learned long ago not to trust the emotions he showed. The others, Madam Yu and Madam Jin seemed curious, but it was hard to say with them.

There was a long pause, then Jin ZiXun huffed. “This is pointless. This hunt is just a farce. I’m not staying. I withdraw!”

Before he could walk away, a purple lightning, a whip shot out, catching his ankle and tripping him. At this, several Jin disciples cried out in alarm, but nobody acted, seeing where the attack came from.

“Ever since the Wen attacked Lotus Pier the Jiang Sect had been the most involved in fighting this war. We’ve suffered the most losses yet we were the first ones at the gates of Nightless City and our people had the most achievements out of the major Sects. If it wasn’t for diplomatic favor, Jin GuangShan could lick the bottom of our boots for a scrap of meat off a rat’s bones.

“Wei WuXian is no better than a servant, but as long as he’s wearing the Jiang Sect’s colors, any insult towards him is an insult towards the Jiang Sect. This is what I’ve been trying to make him understand, but his skull must be thicker than even yours.” Madam Yu paused in her speech, throwing a look towards Wei WuXian, who looked back with an emotionless expression. She then turned back to Jin ZiXun, still struggling on the ground. “What do you have to say?!”

At this, nobody said anything. The clearing descended into tense silence. Then Lan XiChen also stepped forward, taking a deep breath.

“Young Master Jin, withdraw or not, you still insulted a student of the Lan Sect.” Lan XiChen turned to him, his expression unreadable. “While I have no authority to comment on your insults towards the Jiang Sect, Young Master Wei is also my brother’s good friend, so by insulting him, you upset my brother as well. This is not something I take lightly.” He paused. Everyone waited for Jin ZiXun’s apology, but it didn’t come.

“Apologize, you fool.” Madam Jin hissed at him also.

“But aunt, this is—!” Jin ZiXun started, his tone upset.

“Are you deaf?” Jin Ling barked at him. “Nobody is interested in your excuses. Apologize or I’ll shoot you down where you are.”

“You—!” Jin ZiXun turned on him, but Madam Jin cut him off.

“ZiXun!” She glared. Jin ZiXun looked back at her for a moment. He finally pushed himself up on his feet and turned to Madam Yu and Lan XiChen. He worked his jaw for a minute, then he said:

“Sect Leader Lan, I was only telling the truth. I don’t see how I’m in the wrong.” He said, frowning. “Or would you like to explain how Lan SiZhui got to Koi Tower weeks ago?” Lan XiChen was quiet, then inclined his head.

“Young Master Jin, I believe there are things you do not know about. Since that is the case, I don’t see how you should make judgement on the matter.”

“So, Sect Leader Lan, would you care to explain these things?” Jin ZiXun asked arrogantly. Jin GuangYao stepped forward, as if to say something, but before he could, Madam Yu cut him off.

“Jin ZiXun, how is this any of your business?!” She glared. “Do you think you’re important enough to poke your nose into the matters of a Sect Leader and his disciple?! You’re even more spoiled than I thought.”

“ZiXun, just apologize.” Madam Jin also barked at him and Jin ZiXun looked angry. However, his anger could not last long in the face of his obvious defeat. He clenched his teeth, then bowed mockingly low to the two Sect heads.

“Sect Leader Lan, Madam Yu, I apologize for any offense I might’ve caused the Lan and Jiang Sects.” He paused, then rose from his bow. He looked at Jin GuangYao one last time, then turned and walked away. The Jin disciples in the back exchanged looks, then four of them hurried after him, while the others stayed. Lan XiChen turned back to Madam Jin, who looked upset.

“Sect Leader Lan, the youth is foolish. Please, forgive ZiXun for his temper.”

“Jin ZiXun is the same age as I.” Lan XiChen said briefly, clipped like he wanted to say more but held himself back. He turned to Lan WangJi. “WangJi, the hunting grounds will be expanded. Please, continue the hunt.” He turned to Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi next. “JingYi, Jin Ling.” He glanced back at Jin Ling, then turned to the Lan again. “It is good to see you could make it. I’m sure I’ll hear about your absence before the banquet?”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan JingYi nodded.

“As if we don’t have anything else to do.” Jin Ling grumbled under his breath, but he finally put his arrow back in his quiver and swung his bow onto his back.

“Then let us go.” Lan XiChen told Lan WangJi, who nodded. He exchanged one last look with Wei WuXian, who smiled at him. He told him something quietly and Lan WangJi nodded, then joined his brother. Everyone bowed to them and they returned it before walking off, their light-colored clothes standing out in the warm colors of the forest. Jin GuangYao began speaking to Madam Jin in low tones and Jin Ling joined Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui.

“Should we go back?” He asked. Lan SiZhui looked over to Wei WuXian, who was watching Madam Yu with a blank expression.

“Ah, maybe...”

“Madam Yu, I should take YanLi back.” Wei WuXian suddenly spoke up with a deep bow. Madam Yu narrowed her eyes at him.

“Do you think I’m not capable of taking A-Li back myself?!” Lan SiZhui cringed at her harsh tone.

“Ah, perhaps we should let A-Xuan bring A-Li back.” Madam Jin suggested. Madam Yu looked towards her and frowned.

“Madam Jin, after this fight, do you think it is wise to let them go themselves?” Wei WuXian asked with a frown of his own.

“A-Li, A-Xuan has upset you. You should let him take you back to show how sorry he is.” Madam Jin told Jiang YanLi, ignoring Wei WuXian.

“Mother—” Jin ZiXun started, but his mother cut him off.

“You!” Madam Jin turned to him next. “You upset YanLi, this is why we got into this situation in the first place. Can’t you control yourself? Wasn’t it you who wanted to invite YanLi here? Why are you acting like this now then?!”

At this, Jin ZiXuan's eyes widened even more and he looked at Jiang YanLi with something akin horror in his expression. The whole clearing quieted and everyone looked at Jin ZiXuan.

"Is that true?" Wei WuXian frowned. "But you said your mother..."

"My mother didn't force me to do anything!" Jin ZiXuan suddenly burst out. "I... I... I wanted to invite Lady Jiang!"

Silence descended upon them. Jin ZiXuan paused, then looked around, seeing that everyone was watching him, his face got red. He hesitated a moment, then suddenly he stumbled back, then ran, as fast as he could, in a different direction.

"My stupid son..." Madam Jin shook her head, then turned to Madam Yu. "A-Yuan, please, forgive A-Xuan. You know how he is."

"Perhaps it is best if we go back to the camp and rest." Madam Yu said, stepping up to Jiang YanLi. "Wei WuXian!" She barked over her shoulder. "A-Cheng is still hunting the prey while you're here, having stupid arguments. Is this how you represent the Jiang Sect?! What a disgrace!" She huffed, taking hold of Jiang YanLi's hand. "It is no wonder the Jin Sect finds so many things to insult you for."

"This Wei WuXian, he really has a temper, doesn't he?" Madam Jin chuckled as she took Jiang YanLi's other side. "A-Li, you shouldn't stand up to him like you just did in the future. It is going to bring you bad reputation. Come now, let us go back and enjoy the hunt from far away. This is clearly the men's territory to let out steam. It is no place for a lady like yourself. What was my son even thinking, bringing you out here!"

With this, their voices faded, so did their persons as they walked down the path, leaving the three juniors with Wei WuXian and the others. The Jin cultivators collected themselves and discussed where to go to hunt next, while Clan Leader Yao cast a look in their direction before walking off. Lan JingYi, Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling and Wei WuXian looked at each other.

"Ah, SiZhui, I didn't have the chance to thank you for standing up to me." Wei WuXian said with a tired smile. "So, thanks!"

"Brother Wei, what just happened..."

"It's better if we don't talk about it here." Wei WuXian said, looking around. "How about we meet before the banquet, let's talk then."

"First ZeWu-Jun, now you." Jin Ling scoffed. "We have things to do, Lan SiZhui, we don't have time for this. Or did you forget we had plans?"

"Didn't we agree not to act until we know more?" Lan JingYi asked.

"You agreed. I never gave my blessings, did I?" Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"Let us talk about this more in private. We've discussed too much in the open as it is." He said and the others seemed to agree. Lan SiZhui turned to Wei WuXian, who watched them

curiously. “Brother Wei, good hunt to you. We’ll go now.”

“You aren’t participating?” Wei WuXian gestured over his shoulder. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I was here because Sect Leader Jin requested my presence, but otherwise I’m not required to participate. Since I clearly have some things to discuss with my friends, I should go and do that instead.” He gestured towards Lan JingYi and Jin Ling.

“Mn.” Wei WuXian pressed his lips together and smiled. “Then we will meet before the banquet.” He nodded. Jin Ling huffed and cut between them as he walked off towards the path leading down from the mountain. Lan SiZhui smiled at Wei WuXian and with a brief bow he followed his friends off the mountain. Before he turned the corner, he glanced back, seeing Wei WuXian looking after them, his expression thoughtful.



“What did you mean on the mountain, Jin Ling?” Lan JingYi asked once they were in the safety of Lan SiZhui’s tent.

They had an easier time getting off the mountain after the fight, not running into anyone else. They purposefully didn’t go in the same direction as Madam Yu and Madam Jin walked off with Jiang YanLi, so they wouldn’t meet. Now, they sat around Lan SiZhui’s low table, a pot of freshly brewed tea in front of them. Lan JingYi had applied a silencing talisman the moment they stepped inside, so they could talk freely.

“I meant what I said.” Jin Ling said, busying himself with his tea, so he didn’t have to look at Lan JingYi. “I’m not willing to just sit around, do nothing.”

“We agreed that we do not know enough of Jin GuangYao’s plans to effectively protect ourselves against them.” Lan JingYi frowned. “Unless he makes a move, we aren’t even sure he’s after us.”

“And do what until then?” Jin Ling asked back, annoyed. “We should gather information in the meantime to know more so we could act. It’s not like Jin GuangYao is going to act while we notice. He is good at doing things in secret, or have you forgotten?”

“So, what should we do then?” Lan JingYi frowned. “Become spies now? MouShi, I know I said you like to plan and do these things, but it doesn’t mean we have the skills to do things like this.”

“Oh, so when we spied on him just days ago we did not have the skills?” Jin Ling scoffed. “What have we been doing during the Sunshot Campaign—no, ever since we arrived here? We’ve been working in secret.”

“And we got exposed by multiple people in the process, probably to the one you’re planning on spying on right now as well.” Lan JingYi informed him. Jin Ling waved him off dismissively.



“That was in the past, now is now. They don’t know we’re onto them now, so we should use this to our advantage.”

“And where and how are you planning on going?” Lan JingYi asked arrogantly. Jin Ling cocked an eyebrow at him.

“At Qiongqi.” Came the equally as arrogant reply and Jin Ling sipped his own tea.

“At Qiongqi?” Lan JingYi asked skeptically. Jin Ling nodded.

“Where they keep the Wen.”

“MouShi, do you forget we’ve been there already?”

“We didn’t get into the building before.” Jin Ling said pointedly. Lan JingYi shook his head.

“It was heavily warded. How do you plan on getting inside? We couldn’t the last time we were there.”

“Firstly, the last time we didn’t know it was going to be heavily warded. Secondly, the last time we didn’t have Lan SiZhui with us.”

“And what—” Lan JingYi began, then cut himself off, glancing at Lan SiZhui. He thought for a moment, then more carefully said: “Lan SiZhui doesn’t have his spiritual powers. While I agree it is better if he’s with us, in this situation I’m unsure how he could help.” Lan SiZhui cocked an eyebrow; this was Lan JingYi saying he found Lan SiZhui useless. He didn’t mind the insult, he knew that much. It was just surprising that Lan JingYi would actually say it.

“Lan SiZhui has the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s half.” Jin Ling said, clearly struggling with his uncomfortable feelings. “While I don’t agree with these methods, maybe they can be of use there. If we can’t get past the wards with spiritual energy, maybe we can with resentful energy.”

“I’m not sure that’s true.” Lan SiZhui said. Jin Ling glared at him.

“How would you know if you never tried?” He asked, then looked between him and Lan JingYi. “You say we should wait Jin GuangYao out. I say if we do that, he is going to act without our knowledge at all. We will be caught in his trap before we know it. I would rather try to prevent it from happening at all than sitting and waiting for fate to catch up with us.”

“I’m inclined to agree with Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui admitted. Lan JingYi looked at him like he was a wild animal – and for that matter, Jin Ling also looked at him curiously and surprised. Lan SiZhui felt his face flush. “It’s just... It would be good to know what they did to Hudie.”

“And you also want to see Wen Qing and Wen Ning.” Jin Ling pointed out. Lan SiZhui nodded. Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. “If any of them dies, you’re not allowed to bring them back.”

“He doesn’t even know how to do that.” Lan JingYi told Jin Ling, offended on Lan SiZhui’s behalf. Then he turned to Lan SiZhui. “Do you?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui said, amused. “I do not.”

“Anyways, it’s two of us against you, JingYi.” Jin Ling said. Lan JingYi sighed.

“Fine. Let’s go to Qiongqi and spy. But I’m still part of the Lan Sect, so we’ll have to inform ZeWu-Jun as well.”

“Must you tell about your every single move to him?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Lan JingYi huffed.

“Imagine this; I have to inform my Sect Leader when I’m about to do something that might ignite another war between the Sects. How troublesome.”

“You!” Jin Ling slapped the table so hard, Lan SiZhui swore his cup jumped its height on the table. “How dare you take this tone with me?!”

“Ah, SiZhui, do you see this? His father and grandfather are still alive, but he’s already assuming the air of a Sect Leader!” Lan JingYi grinned and Jin Ling glared, standing and taking his sleeve in his hand, ready to slap Lan JingYi.

“Say that again!” Lan JingYi laughed so hard, he fell backwards, holding his stomach. Jin Ling got so mad at this, he rushed over and began beating him with his sleeves. Lan JingYi could only roll away from him.



The participants of the hunt headed back to Koi Tower the next day. Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling rode with those who took the horses once again, since Lan JingYi could only take one person on his sword and right now Lan SiZhui couldn’t fly either. This time however Wei WuXian didn’t come with them, instead he rode the sword with the rest of the Jiang Sect, due to Jiang FengMian’s request. The ride was long and tiring, but they arrived by the evening. The banquet would be held the next day, so they had quite some time to kill.

That night they decided to talk to Lan XiChen and share their plans with him as well as give the promised record of their departure. As Lan SiZhui sat there and listened to the boys tell the same tale again, he couldn’t help but feel a huge amount of pride at them. Jin Ling had certainly come a long way from being the arrogant spoiled brat when they met three years ago.

“So, what is the next step?” Lan XiChen asked. Jin Ling huffed, tired. Naturally, they didn’t tell Lan XiChen the names of the people involved, though from Lan XiChen’s expression Lan SiZhui suspected he guessed who they were talking about.

“We will keep gathering information.” He said. “Since the last time we couldn’t get into the building, we will try again. Maybe even Lan SiZhui could help.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded. “This seems to be a logical step, but...” He paused for a moment, hesitating, then said: “Wouldn’t it be wiser to gather information by waiting for the

other's next step?" He asked. "Since he hasn't made his move yet, maybe you shouldn't rush to make this process go any faster."

"Believe me, I know this person." Jin Ling glared. "He is not one to make his moves obvious or even predictable. He will strike when we least expect it and from where we least expect it. It is more likely we won't even notice we've been cornered until we try to get out of the situation." He paused. "We've tried that way already. Now it is time to try this way."

"I see." Lan XiChen nodded, solemn. "If you feel this is the best decision, there is hardly anything I can do or say to contradict this decision."

"Good." Jin Ling glared. "Nobody asked for your permission."

"Jin Ling!" Lan JingYi scolded, but Jin Ling just frowned at him.

"JingYi, you're not even his disciple. You're the disciple of the ZeWu-Jun twenty years in the future. Don't act stupid."

"ZeWu-Jun in the future was once ZeWu-Jun of the past, so your statement is false." Lan JingYi said.

"Boys." Lan XiChen scolded gently, smiling with no small amount of amusement, sharing a look over the boys' head with Lan SiZhui, as if they were two parents finding their children's antics tiresome. Lan SiZhui held back a snort. "Whether you need my permission or not, I give it. Also thank you for telling me about all of this."

"Of course, ZeWu-Jun." Lan JingYi beamed and Jin Ling rolled his eyes, leaning back.

They stayed for a little while to chat and have some tea, but soon the fatigue of the day-long travel made itself known and so the three of them retired for the night.



The following morning Jin Ling showed up just as Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui sat down to have breakfast. Jin Ling grumbled a little about the Lan's schedule, but then quieted as he also began to eat.

"We should go today." Jin Ling said after they finished eating and were enjoying some tea. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"Why today?" He asked, confused. "The banquet is today. If we go to Qiongqi today, we will miss the occasion."

"Why would you want to participate some banquet?" Jin Ling challenged. "I'll invite you to all of them once we get home." He rolled his eyes.

"It's not that." Lan SiZhui shook his head. "It's just, this banquet was the one where Wei WuXian first turned against the Sects publicly. I just don't want to miss it if I can help."

“I know that despite our changes not many things actually changed,” Lan JingYi started, “but I believe we’ve changed enough about Wei WuXian’s circumstances that he will not make this mistake again.”

“Also, this might be our only chance.” Jin Ling said. “Jin GuangYao is here now. We should go while he’s not there.”

“That’s true.” Lan JingYi nodded. “SiZhui, it will be fine. Young Master Wei knows not to get into trouble, or else Madam Yu will punish him.”

Lan SiZhui thought about this for a minute, but no matter how he turned it in his head, he had to admit the other two were right. If Wei WuXian haven’t learned his lesson yet, he would have to face Madam Yu’s wrath and nobody wanted that, Lan SiZhui suspected not even Wei WuXian was brave enough.

“Fine.” He agreed. At this, Lan JingYi beamed and Jin Ling rolled his eyes at his friend, but he also looked relieved and satisfied.

They finished their tea quietly, then Jin Ling stood and stretched.

“I will go and gather my things. You should also prepare for a longer journey. Bring enough food and supplies. I’m not going to carry all that stuff.”

“We’re not your servants.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“Who would want you as a servant anyways?” Jin Ling scoffed. “You’re lazy and rude.”

“Hey!” Lan JingYi protested. Lan SiZhui sighed, deciding to end this fight before it could begin.

“We will bring supplies.” He said. “Let us meet at the common areas in an hour.”

“Mn.” Jin Ling nodded, then turned and walked out of the room. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look.

“It will be fine.” Lan JingYi said as he gathered up their trays to bring outside. “Wen Qing and Wen Ning were honestly fine when we saw them.”

“I believe you.” Lan SiZhui nodded, not at all surprised Lan JingYi knew he was worried.

“We will also continue to make sure they are fine.” Lan JingYi said. “While we’re there, we could sneak them messenger talismans or something like that to have them message us in case of an emergency.”

Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened at the idea – he didn’t even think about that! “We could?” He asked hopefully and Lan JingYi smiled at him, nodding.

“Of course. I’ll prepare some. I will also include some signal flares and perhaps some protective talismans as well.”

“Ah, JingYi... Thank you.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him and Lan JingYi’s own smile also grew.

“No need to thank me.” He said, squeezing Lan SiZhui’s shoulder before he turned and walked out of the room. “We’ll meet in an hour!” He called over his shoulder.

Lan SiZhui watched as he headed towards the kitchens, then his gaze caught on Wei WuXian, in the process of crossing the courtyard in front of the Lan’s rooms, stopping and looking at the two of them. He raised his hand and waved at Lan SiZhui when he noticed him looking and Lan SiZhui also waved back before closing his door and turning to pack his things up again.

An hour later the three of them met at the common areas. The courtyard was not deserted at this time of the day, many disciples from various Sects and Clans gathering to have breakfast. Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling ignored them as they met.

“So, how should we go?” Lan JingYi asked once they were all there.

“What do you mean?” Jin Ling frowned, looking at something over Lan JingYi’s shoulder. Lan SiZhui also turned to look, seeing Wei WuXian sitting with Jiang Cheng, his arm thrown over Jiang Cheng’s shoulder, saying something to him in low tones. Lan SiZhui turned back to Jin Ling and Lan JingYi.

“I mean you don’t have a spiritual sword to fly and Lan SiZhui is injured, he cannot travel. I can only carry one person on my sword.”

“Right.” Jin Ling frowned, blinking his eyes to focus back on their conversation. “Right. Naturally, we will go via horses then.”

“And where do you plan on getting horses? Or do you want to buy some with your non-existent money?” Lan JingYi cocked his eyebrow. “Remember, you’re not home anymore.”

“I’m aware.” Jin Ling snapped. “But the Jin Sect provides one to those who go out night-hunting. We will just say that’s what we’re doing and they will give us some.”

“So, you’re going to lie.” Lan JingYi said flatly.

“What else should I do, sell radish for money? In four years, I might be able to afford one horse then.” He glared. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“We should just ask ZeWu-Jun for some.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“Can you dress without him or do you need his help with that, too?!” Jin Ling sneered, then turned and began to walk away. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a look, then followed him towards the main courtyard.

“I’m just saying we have a Sect Leader on our side, in the known. Shouldn’t we take advantage of this?”

“We’ve been fine on our own so far. We don’t need his help.”

“Let’s not argue about this anymore.” Lan SiZhui requested. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling really needed to find the common tone already.

“Fine. We’re still not asking for horses from him though.” Jin Ling said, not even slowing down to accommodate the Lan’s speed. Thankfully, Lan JingYi decided not to keep arguing, just rolled his eyes and followed without a word. Lan SiZhui was grateful for the silence.

They arrived to the main courtyard when they heard their names called from behind them. They turned, to see Lan XiChen approaching. Jin Ling let out an annoyed huff but he just crossed his arms on his chest, not voicing his annoyance otherwise, which was a wise action to take. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed to Lan XiChen, who inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“Boys.” He greeted when he reached them, stopping a few steps away from them. “I heard from disciples that you were leaving.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling glared.

“Jin Ling, you must know that this banquet is in the honor of the winner of the Crowd Hunt as well as an important cultivation event.” He paused and Jin Ling frowned at him, obviously not getting the hint but trying to understand anyways.

“ZeWu-Jun?” It was Lan JingYi who asked for clarification, but Lan XiChen was still looking at Jin Ling as he answered.

“It is said that the renewal of Lady Jiang and Jin ZiXuan’s engagement will be discussed on this occasion.”

Jin Ling’s eyes widened and his hands clenched into fists. He looked towards Koi Tower, his gaze searching. Then he clenched his teeth as well and looked back at Lan XiChen.

“If that’s so, maybe it’s best if I’m not here anyways.” He said. “I would just ruin the occasion. However, if this is true, then that’s good.” He nodded in a rare moment of maturity. “Right now, we have other things to worry about and this thing getting solved without our input would be ideal.”

“You don’t sound too enthusiastic about it.” Lan JingYi frowned, but he needn’t to worry about Jin Ling’s mature moment for long, because the next moment his face got redder than his vermilion mark and he turned to glare at Lan JingYi as if wishing to kill him with his look.

“How dare you say that?! Aren’t they important to me?! This is one of the only reasons I’ve stayed here in the first place!”

“Ah.” Lan JingYi said lightly, a small, teasing smile playing in the corner of his lips. “I know, I know.”

“You—You’re truly insufferable, you know that, right?!” At this, Lan JingYi’s smile grew into a wide, self-satisfied smirk.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait until the banquet ends?” Lan XiChen asked once the tempers settled a little. Lan JingYi shook his head, but it was Jin Ling who gave a verbal answer.

“The person we’re after is here, so is his associate. It is best if we go now while they’re busy with the banquet like everyone else.”

“I see.” Lan XiChen nodded. “That is smart.”

“Of course, it’s smart.” Lan JingYi grinned. “He’s MouShi.” At this, even Lan XiChen smiled. Then, he became serious again and asked:

“Do you need anything else? Food, talismans, transportation?”

“Since ZeWu-Jun offered.” Lan JingYi threw a pointed look in Jin Ling’s direction. Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “We would take three horses if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Take them.”

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui bowed and Lan XiChen smiled at them.

“Take care. I hope you’re successful in your mission.”

“Thank you.” The three of them echoed, although Jin Ling’s voice was somewhat grumbled. With this, the three of them bowed, then continued their way towards where the Jin Sect kept their horses.

They didn’t have any issues once they told the person standing guard that ZeWu-Jun allowed them to take some horses. They quickly saddled up and soon they were ready to depart. Lan SiZhui found this interesting, how quickly he got used to riding horses. He hadn’t done that a lot in the past, so he was never an excellent rider. Ever since he got his spiritual sword, he had been flying mostly everywhere if he wasn’t walking, but getting around with horses was quicker than walking. Though he still missed having Yingjiu underneath his feet, he realized he minded less and less having to ride horses now.

The three of them galloped out of Lanling in a steady pace, not stopping for the several vendors who offered their goods to them in loud voices to be heard over the clapping of the horses’ hooves on the stones. Jin Ling led them with purpose, obviously having taken this route several times before. Lan SiZhui wondered what it was like for him to be here now, where he grew up, and not have the weight of a Sect Heir and a tragic orphan on his shoulders. He wondered if Jin Ling felt better or worse for it.

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They didn’t ride for long before they got interrupted once again. They were on a mountain path, having slowed down their horses on the upslope when there was the sound of hooves behind them. Jin Ling was the first to stop his horse and turn around to look behind them, but Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui also quickly turned to see who came to get them. Perhaps it was the Jin demanding their presence on the banquet, or Jin ZiXun coming to settle the score.

“Lan SiZhui!” They heard the cheerful voice and they saw the person as well.

“What is *he* doing here?!” Jin Ling asked alarmed and slightly angry. Lan SiZhui glanced back, seeing him glaring at the rider with wide eyes, his hands tightening on the reins.

“He must’ve seen us depart and got curious.” Lan JingYi said.

“I’ll give him something to be curious about!” Jin Ling sneered. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath but decided not to comment.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, you ride too fast!” The rider said as he got closer, grinning. “My poor horse can’t keep up!”

“Then why are you here?!” Jin Ling snapped. “Don’t you have to attend the banquet? After all, you’re the one who caught the most prey. It is unbecoming of you not to show up on your own celebration.”

“Ah, Jin Ling, why are you so rude?” He pouted, leaning against his horse’s neck.

“Because I don’t want you here!” Jin Ling answered heatedly. Lan SiZhui for once also shared this sentiment. Wei WuXian had been to Qiongqi in his previous life twice and both times he had committed a crime the Sects had never forgiven him for. Lan SiZhui didn’t want this to happen again.

“Well, too bad.” Wei WuXian said. “Because I’m coming with!” He grinned. Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Brother Wei, please, don’t take offense, but... This time I agree with Jin Ling.” He said sheepishly. “It would be best if you’d go back to the banquet and not come with us.”

“Lan SiZhui.” Wei WuXian straightened up, tilting his head to the side, suddenly serious and cold. “Do not take me for a fool. I’ve also heard the rumors. Even if I wasn’t curious about whatever it is you’ve been hiding ever since we’ve met, I also care about the Wen. I know you want to help them. Wen Ning is also my friend and I owe Wen Qing for saving Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu’s life. Even if they don’t see the value in that, I do.”

“And where do you get this from, that we’re going to ‘help the Wen’?” Jin Ling frowned. “This has nothing to do with it.”

“Lan SiZhui was brought to Koi Tower some weeks ago with head injuries. People say he got the injuries from fighting with the Jin while protecting the Wen in the Wen village on Dafan Mountain. Jin Ling, do you forget that I’ve also been there when the three of you planned on going to YiLing and freeing Wen Ning and Wen Qing? You also act just as shady as you did back then.”

“Young Master Wei, Jin Ling is telling the truth this time.” Lan JingYi also spoke up. “We’re not going there to help the Wen.” Wei WuXian didn’t say anything to that, just kept looking at Lan SiZhui with his strangely serious and cold look. Lan SiZhui looked over at Jin Ling



and Lan JingYi for a moment, but this must've been enough for Jin Ling to see something on his face.

"Absolutely not." Jin Ling snapped. "Lan SiZhui, when we began this whole thing, I had one request, only one." He glared at Lan SiZhui sharply and seriously. "That once someone dies, they must stay dead."

"What a weird thing to ask." Wei WuXian muttered from the side, but quiet enough that it didn't bother Jin Ling.

"So far you've been lucky, and I'm also inclined to believe when you say you don't know how. But I don't trust him." He pointed at Wei WuXian.

"How surprising." Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

"Criticize me all you want, Lan JingYi. My father is dead, my mother is dead and it's all one man's fault." He said pointedly. Lan SiZhui was quiet for several moments, then glanced at Wei WuXian before turning back to Jin Ling.

"He is going to follow us anyways. Isn't it better if we can keep an eye on him?"

"We don't know what my uncle knows." Jin Ling glared. "And if there's sensitive information where we're going and Wei WuXian learns about them?"

"We will leave him outside to stand guard." Lan JingYi proposed. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"So he can kill all Jin soldiers there like last time?"

"When have I killed even one Jin?" Wei WuXian frowned.

"Shut up, we're not talking to you." Jin Ling snapped at him.

"I will keep an eye on him and stop anything from happening, whatever it takes." Lan SiZhui said.

"Lan SiZhui." Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui sighed.

"Jin Ling. You know he's going to follow us anyways. Is it better if he goes there on his own, drawing conclusions and acting out of instinct than if we are there with him to explain the situation to him?" He asked, tiredly. "I also don't want him to come. You know I don't." He said sternly. "But this way, at least, we can keep an eye on him."

There was a long pause when nobody said anything, then Jin Ling closed his eyes and took some deep breaths. There was a long minute of stillness, nobody speaking or moving, then Jin Ling opened his eyes and turned to Wei WuXian, holding out his hand.

"Give me your flute."

"Huh?" Wei WuXian frowned at him, though his hand was already moving towards Chenqing.

“I only allow you to come with us if you hand over your flute. If you do not agree, I will shoot up a signal flare, then request Madam Yu to personally take you back. Maybe I’ll even have you share a room with the Jin Sect’s beloved dogs.” He glared at Wei WuXian, who studied him for a long time. In the end, he smiled and handed over Chenqing.

“Take care of it.” Wei WuXian said. Jin Ling held the flute up to his face then frowned.

“Did you carve this yourself?”

“Of course!” Wei WuXian nodded, sounding proud. “When I first got my sword, I only got a cheap one. Since I was so close to the Sect Leader’s family, it felt wrong to have such a simple sword, so I decided to learn how to carve.” He grinned, gesturing at the sword on his side. “Do you like it?”

“It’s hideous. It should be burned at least twice, so not even the ashes remain on this Earth.” Jin Ling said, rolling his eyes. He still pulled out a qiankun pouch and simply threw the flute inside. Lan SiZhui cringed at the handling of such a fine instrument, but Wei WuXian didn’t seem bothered. He grinned and seemed self-satisfied and smug.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, did you know? This will be our first adventure together.” He beamed. Jin Ling made a noise not unlike an angry growl, then turned his horse around and hurried ahead. The three of them could only follow before they lost his trail.

## Exigency IV.

Heavy fog covered the forest by the time they arrived to their destination. Rainclouds hang from the sky, not yet releasing their burden, but covering the sun and painting the road ahead of them dark and moody. It reminded Lan SiZhui of early mornings in the fall, when he was still a child and spent the night in the Jingshi. He had always liked to sit in front of the door with Hanguang-Jun next to him and a warm cup of tea in their hands. They would not talk, nor do anything in particular, just sit and watch the seasons change.

However, now it was not a peaceful morning, nor did he have Hanguang-Jun by his side to tell him the answers to difficult questions. As they walked through the forest, the horses' hooves made a hollow sound on the ground, their breath coming out in puffs of steam. A sharp sting of anxiety sat in Lan SiZhui's stomach. Ahead of him, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi rode with confidence, but next to him Wei WuXian was just as subdued as the land surrounding them.

The last time Lan SiZhui had been to Qiongqi Path had been with the Ghost General. It was a few weeks into their journey. They've already been to YiLing and Dafan Mountain, and they were on their way to Qishan. Wen Ning figured that since it was on the way anyways and he wished to pay his respects to those who lost their lives there, they should go there as well.

They didn't talk much as they arrived. Wen Ning lit some incense burner for his fallen family and for Jin ZiXuan as well. Lan SiZhui offered to burn paper money, but Wen Ning just smiled with his awkward, stiff smile and shook his head sadly. They didn't linger long then.

It had been a long time ago, and Lan SiZhui didn't recognize the place where they trotted with Jin Ling's lead. He was confident in Jin Ling and Lan JingYi's direction, but still. The Qiongqi Path where he visited with Wen Ning had been overgrown with plants and trees. However, the way where Jin Ling led them was sparse forests and rocky hillsides.

"We're almost there." Lan JingYi called back. Lan SiZhui nodded, looking over at Wei WuXian riding by his side. The other teen was also subdued, quiet and serious on the whole ride. He barely said a word since they departed and Lan SiZhui was bothered by the lack of theatrics.

They rode for a few more minutes before Jin Ling signaled stop. They were in an area between two rocky mounds, on their left the forest, on their right only more rocky mounds and open space. They dismounted then, Lan SiZhui taking the reins of his horse and guiding it over to where Jin Ling and Lan JingYi tied their own to a tree.

"The animals stay here, we're going on foot from here." Jin Ling said as he glanced over at Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian. Lan SiZhui nodded. While he tied his own horse up, Jin Ling turned to Wei WuXian. "It's not too late to turn back. If you go now, you might get back by the time the banquet starts."

"And miss the opportunity to gain insight into one of your secret missions?" Wei WuXian asked teasingly. "Jin Ling, you should know me better by now." At this, Jin Ling rolled his

eyes.

“Why did I even agree to take you with us? You’re just a burden. We can’t talk about our mission freely and you’re going to end up poking your nose into things that is none of your business.”

“Ah, you can talk freely!” Wei WuXian offered with a grin. “If you want, I’ll even cover my ears and turn my back!” He said as he did just that.

“You truly are a child.” Jin Ling glared at his back. Wei WuXian whirled back around with a wide smile.

“Ah, such a compliment from the youngest of us!”

“Lunatic.” Jin Ling huffed. Then, he turned to Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui. “I say we tie him up and leave him here.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui scolded gently, without much heat. He also thought Wei WuXian would just be in the way, but short of resorting to violence, he also didn’t know how to prevent him from tagging along.

“Whatever.” Jin Ling threw up his hands. “But you’re not allowed to touch anything, or even look at anything! And if you dare to ask one annoying question, I’ll break your legs, dress you in Wen clothing and leave you to the mercy of the Jin soldiers!”

“Ah, Jin Ling, you’re so small, yet there is so much violence in you.” Wei WuXian shook his head as if disappointed. Jin Ling glared.

“I changed my mind. I’m going to shoot you now instead.” He said, flexing his hand on his bow.

“Alright!” Lan JingYi raised his voice and his hands as he stepped between them. “That’s enough. Young Master Wei is knowledgeable, maybe he can help us get through the barrier. Let’s not shoot anyone just yet.”

“I don’t want his help.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“I didn’t want to be stuck here either, yet here we are.” Lan JingYi mentioned with a pointed look. “And while we’re here, let’s not do something that might have undesired consequences.”

“You’re becoming Lan XiChen, you know that?” Jin Ling gave him an annoyed look, but Lan JingYi just shrugged.

“Now, what’s the plan?” Lan JingYi asked, looking over at Lan SiZhui. He nodded, stepping closer.

“We break in, find any information we can about what he might be planning and get out.” Jin Ling said.

“Yes.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “I know that’s the general plan. I meant right now, how do we get in?”

“You have feet, no? So, you walk.” Jin Ling glared. Lan JingYi glared back.

“Just because you’re annoyed by Wei WuXian, doesn’t mean you need to be like this with the rest of us.”

“JingYi is right.” Lan SiZhui said and Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“Fine. But I’m not like this because Wei WuXian is here. I’m like this because I’m tired of you two always looking for me for answers. What, have you forgotten everything you learned in the meantime?”

“If we wanted to, we could come up with our own plan.” Lan JingYi said with a frown. “We’re asking you because unless something comes from your own mouth, you must protest like it’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever heard or like it’s a great effort to do what we say. We’ve learned to ask you instead, so we don’t have to go these unnecessary steps to get you to do anything.”

That was true enough, though if Lan SiZhui could’ve chosen, he wouldn’t have told this to Jin Ling. As expected, the other got aggravated and sneered at Lan JingYi.

“So, it is my fault that your plans are terrible and troublesome, that I have to make up my own?!”

“That’s not what I—” Lan JingYi began, but before he could finish, Lan SiZhui cut in.

“How about we just plan and not think about who comes up with what?” He asked sharply. He wanted to move and he was frankly tired of the two of them arguing about every single word the other said. “If you two are unable to work together, then perhaps we shouldn’t. And before you start blaming each other, I’d like to remind you that this mission is time sensitive. The banquet won’t go on forever and the person we’re after is smart enough to connect our absence with this plot.”

“Lan SiZhui, you truly have a wicked tongue on you.” Wei WuXian noted from the side, amused.

“Who asked you?!” Jin Ling glared.

“Enough!” Lan SiZhui snapped. “Nobody is allowed to argue nobody anymore. The next time I hear it, I’ll cast silencing spell on you.” He glared at the three of them. They looked back with wide, surprised eyes. Lan SiZhui huffed. “We spend more time arguing than actually doing anything, ever since we arrived here.” He said softly. “Can we just spend this one mission without it?”

“Fine.” Jin Ling huffed, though he didn’t sound as arrogant as before. His voice was small and hesitant. “Since we don’t have any clothes on us, I say we do the same thing we did in YiLing. Sneak inside and work in secret.”

“You’ll stand watch?” Lan JingYi asked, but Jin Ling shook his head.

“I’m coming with. If you—” He slipped into his annoyed voice, but quickly cut himself off, glancing at Lan SiZhui from the corner of his eye. “Wei WuXian can stay and keep watch.” He said haltingly, like he wanted to add something else. If Lan SiZhui knew all it took was to snap at them to stop them from fighting, he would’ve done so long ago.

“I thought you didn’t want him to stay on his own.” Lan JingYi asked, and there was only a little mocking in his tone.

“I don’t have a bow anyways.” Wei WuXian said. “Unless you’re willing to share Huangfeng with me, of course.” He grinned mischievously. Jin Ling frowned and held his bow tighter.

“No way.”

“Then Wei WuXian also comes with us.” Lan JingYi said. “As I said, maybe he could even help us with the barrier. SiZhui, remember when he first came to Cloud Recesses and he broke Grand—” he cut himself off, looking towards Wei WuXian with wide eyes. Wei WuXian pressed his lips together, crossing his arms across his chest and looking away.

“It’s not my fault that the stuffy Lan Sect has such a weak barrier at the gates. It was very easy to break through.”

“You broke into Cloud Recesses?!” Jin Ling glared with wide eyes. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi also exchanged a look – they didn’t know that. Lan JingYi was talking about that time in the future when Grandmaster tried to summon the sword spirit and Wei WuXian broke down the barrier the Grandmaster and Hanguang-Jun put up to protect Cloud Recesses in case something went wrong. Wei WuXian frowned, making a see-saw motion.

“I’d say I let myself in. Ah, Lan Zhan didn’t let us inside because we left our invitations behind, so I had to go back to the inn in Caiyi to get them. By the time I returned it was past five and there was no one at the gates to show my invitations. So, I let myself in so I wouldn’t be stuck outside.”

“So, I really did hear your voice that night!” Jin Ling pointed at him with wide eyes.

“Ah, you were also staying with the Jin in that inn? Did you know that the inn keeper threw us out because the Peacock reserved the whole inn?”

“Who reserves a whole inn for one person?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Jin ZiXuan.” Wei WuXian told him. “He even threw out his betrothed to have it all to himself. How embarrassing!”

“Outrageous!” Lan JingYi agreed. “If she could stay, maybe she would’ve taken it as a sign of affection and by now they could be happily married!”

“You truly are too romantic.” Jin Ling glared at him. “You know who you’re talking about, right?”

“I thought it was also what you wanted?” Lan JingYi asked.

“Of course it is what I want!” Jin Ling protested. “But I most certainly don’t want to hear you talking about them like this!” Lan JingYi shrugged unapologetically. Lan SiZhui didn’t want them to stray from the original topic, so he said:

“We should go while it’s light, so we don’t have to light a lantern inside the building.”

“Ah, right.” Jin Ling frowned, looking up at the sky, where the rainclouds covered the heavens like a thick blanket, refusing to allow strong light to penetrate it. “Let us go then.”

Jin Ling turned and headed towards the mound on their right. Lan JingYi followed him, so Lan SiZhui assumed Qiongqi lay that way.

The four of them hiked up the mound, then Jin Ling gestured them down and they continued their way in a crouch before arriving at the top. From there, they could see a wide expanse of dead land. It looked like some sort of mine, no vegetation, only dirt and rocks all over the place. In the close distance was a settlement.

From where they were, Lan SiZhui could see a watchtower with smaller buildings surrounding it. Next to that was an area where people were, small figures moving against the pale background. Lan SiZhui could see dark clothing he suspected belonged to the Wen and light clothing he suspected belonged to the Jin. They watched for a while as people moved around, although from here they couldn’t tell what they were doing. Sometimes people with carts left the area, or returned to it.

Lan SiZhui watched the Wen and felt a kind of sorrow. He believed his friends when they said the Wen were alright and unharmed. However, they didn’t deserve this. It was partially Lan SiZhui’s fault for going there and insist on staying with them. But he didn’t blame himself much. He knew the Jin would go for the Wen no matter if he was there or not. Wen Qing was, after all, Wen RuoHan’s doctor and they were also blood relatives. This plot with Lan SiZhui was just a different excuse to imprison them, and probably blacken Lan SiZhui’s name in the meantime, although Lan SiZhui still didn’t know the purpose of that.

Still, seeing the Wen here like this was not something Lan SiZhui wanted to see. He wished to avoid this particular plot from the past, but it seemed like no matter what they did, some things refused to be changed. Lan SiZhui wondered if he was also here as a child or if this time around he got away in time. He wouldn’t know unless he talked to the Wen themselves, but they weren’t here for it. This uncertainty made Lan SiZhui mad. If a child was here, no matter if that child was Lan SiZhui or someone else, then the Jin were truly vile people.

Lan SiZhui for all he defended them, he had no much better opinion on them than Jin Ling or Lan JingYi. The only reason he defended them was that he refused to believe people were so evil just for the sake of it. If he learned what Jin GuangShan’s motivation was, he would believe Jin Ling when he said his grandfather was behind this plot, but until then, he didn’t want to believe it.

“Are you alright?” Lan JingYi placed a hand on Lan SiZhui’s shoulder and he looked over, seeing the others all looking at him with some level of concern. Lan SiZhui realized he’d

been digging his fingers into the dirt beneath and he uncurled his fingers, sending a meek smile in their direction.

“I’m fine. We should go.”

“Mn.” Jin Ling nodded, turning and sliding down the other side of the mound. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi followed, Wei WuXian close on their heels as they took another cover behind another mound. Since the place was full of them, they gave plenty of hiding space for them to get to the buildings unnoticed.

They hurried to the buildings and hid behind one right away, just in time to avoid a Jin soldier hurrying past. They waited a beat then continued. This all reminded Lan SiZhui a little at the time they snuck into YiLing to free Wen Ning and Wen Qing. They were in a different place, but Lan SiZhui felt as if the situation was similar.

Soon, they arrived at the watch tower and Lan SiZhui wondered why there weren’t actual guards in it to alert the Jin of their arrival. This thought quickly fled his mind however, when Jin Ling and Lan JingYi turned to face Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian.

“This is it. We don’t know what kind of wards are on this building, but it’s hard to break through.” Lan JingYi said. “We’ve tried with the most basic methods, but nothing’s worked.”

“Right.” Jin Ling nodded. “Wei WuXian, make yourself useful.”

“Ah, Young Master Jin, is that all I’m good for?” Wei WuXian pouted. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Yes. Do you not know your own reputation? You’re a troublemaker and a lunatic.”

“Do I really have a reputation like this?” Wei WuXian turned to Lan SiZhui now, who blinked at him.

“Does it really matter? *Does it really bother you?* Just get to it so we can get to work already!” Jin Ling commanded with a scowl.

“Jin Ling, be nice.” Lan SiZhui told him, then turned to Wei WuXian. “Brother Wei, please, help us. This is your craft. We’d be honored to learn from you.”

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, you’re so polite!” Wei WuXian sighed. “Fine, but if I do this, MouShi has to take back that I’m a troublemaker and a lunatic!”

“I’m not taking it back since it was not me who made this reputation for you. You want to seem better in people’s eyes? Then stop playing around all the time and take something seriously for once!”

“But brother Jin, I don’t want to become like you.” Wei WuXian frowned.

“Ah, a patrol is coming.” Lan JingYi said from where he’d been keeping watch.



“Wei WuXian!” Jin Ling glared at him. Wei WuXian glared back, then after several seconds, he sighed and turned to the building. He put his hand on the wall of the tower. He closed his eyes and tilted his head to the side. It was quiet for a long moment, then he opened his eyes and made a couple of hand movements Lan SiZhui could only vaguely follow. He recognized some kind of charm being cast, then Wei WuXian applied it to the barrier.

“Try it now.” Wei WuXian nodded towards the door next to Jin Ling who took guard while they waited. Jin Ling moved away so Lan JingYi could get to the door. As he reached to open it some spiritual energy released but otherwise nothing stopped his movements.

“Really?” Jin Ling looked over his shoulder at the door, then at Wei WuXian with a flat look. Wei WuXian looked smug. Jin Ling rolled his eyes in answer.

“Let’s go.” Lan JingYi said, unsheathing his sword as he pushed the door open. He entered first and Lan SiZhui followed, knowing that Jin Ling would watch their back. Wei WuXian also followed.

Inside the building there was a general reception area and a staircase to the second level. Since it was slightly gloomy outside due to the heavy rainclouds outside, only dim light allowed inside. There was no one inside. The room looked completely normal and unassuming. There was none of the usual Jin decorations, just simple, everyday decorations scattered all over the otherwise sparse room. There were no emblems with the peony, nor other indications as to who this place belonged to.

As the door closed behind Jin Ling, darkness fell onto the room, but soon Lan JingYi had a fire talisman lit and he picked up two lanterns off a table to pass along. By the light of the lanterns, the room didn’t look much different.

“JingYi.” Jin Ling requested quietly and Lan JingYi nodded, pulling out a silencing talisman. He cast it, then they waited a beat to see if anyone outside noticed the small burst of spiritual energy. They heard the footsteps of the patrol Lan JingYi saw earlier, but they passed the building without any issue. The four of them let out a sigh of relief.

“Alright.” Jin Ling looked around. “Let’s start searching.”

“What are we supposed to even look for?” Lan JingYi asked with a frown.

“Anything you find useful.” Jin Ling said.

“We should also see if the letters are here.” Lan SiZhui offered and Jin Ling nodded.

“Yes. The letters and anything useful. If you’re not sure if something is useful, put it away anyways.”

“Mn.” Lan JingYi nodded, moving deeper inside the room. He held one of the lanterns while Lan SiZhui had the other.

“What kind of letters are we looking for?” Wei WuXian asked, still standing near the door.

“You’re not looking for anything other than the exit. Feel free to leave.” Jin Ling answered snappily.

“Jin Ling, you’re so rude to me yet I’m not aware I’ve offended you with anything. Why are you mad at me?” Wei WuXian sounded offended. Lan SiZhui left them to it, placing the lantern on the table while he also moved towards where Lan JingYi was looking through some books.

“I don’t need a reason to dislike you, Wei WuXian. I just do. You’re annoying and proud and bad tempered. Isn’t that enough reason to don’t like you?”

“You’re just as annoying and proud and bad tempered. By your logic, a lot of people should not like you.”

“A lot of people don’t like me.” Jin Ling answered, annoyed. “Are you satisfied now? Can you shut up now? We’re trying to be discreet.”

“We’ve cast a silencing charm.” Wei WuXian answered and there was shuffling of some kind behind Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi. They turned to see what was going on, seeing Wei WuXian lifting the lid of an incense burner to look inside. He leaned down to sniff into it.

“Didn’t I tell you not to touch anything or look at anything?!” Jin Ling snapped, going over and snatching Wei WuXian’s wrist. The other raised his eyebrows. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged an uneasy look.

No matter how much time they spent in the past, they, or at least Lan SiZhui, still held a certain kind of respect towards his former seniors, including Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi. They might’ve been younger than them here, but Lan SiZhui just couldn’t see them as anything but reassuring adults who were powerful, knowledgeable and who protected him. To see Jin Ling touch him, more so, with such familiarity, it seemed utterly wrong.

It wasn’t that Wei WuXian acted as he had when he assumed the air of a powerful individual in the future. It wasn’t even that he minded touching; in the past year Lan SiZhui had seen him touch more people than Lan SiZhui interacted with on a daily basis in his old life. It was just the idea of the YiLing Patriarch being with them instead of Wei WuXian, cultivator and head disciple of the Jiang Sect. Lan SiZhui had a hard time acknowledging this, and from the look on Lan JingYi’s face, he supposed the other also felt this way.

“What are you going to do? Tie me up like you threatened?” Wei WuXian asked, tilting his head to the side.

“How about I break your legs?” Jin Ling glared.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui called over. The two turned towards them. “We should concentrate on why we came here.” Lan SiZhui tried to steer the investigation back to its original purpose.

“I’m not the one not listening.” Jin Ling said.

“You’re not my Sect Leader, not even my friend, nor my senior. In fact, I’m older than you.” Wei WuXian said coldly, prying his arm out of Jin Ling’s hold. “You can’t command me to do anything.”

“Wei WuXian, I told you my conditions of you coming with us. If you don’t hold yourself to them, I’ll have to call Madam Yu.”

“You keep threatening me with Madam Yu like the two of you are so close.” Wei WuXian frowned.

“She’s my—” Jin Ling cut himself off, glaring at Wei WuXian. “Her and I agree that you’re horrible, so I’m confident if she comes, she will punish you.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi began. “Leave him be. As long as he doesn’t read anything he isn’t supposed to, we’re good. And even Wei WuXian would not betray our privacy so much that he would read our letters. Right, Young Master Wei?” He raised his eyebrows pointedly. Wei WuXian shrugged. “How about the two of us stay here and look around here while the two of you go upstairs with SiZhui?”

“Whatever.” Jin Ling snapped, already heading towards the stairs. “But if you let him read anything, I’ll break your legs as well.”

“I figured.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. Him and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look, then Lan SiZhui joined Jin Ling at the stairs, snatching up the lantern from the table as he went. The two of them headed up.

This room was different than the one they entered earlier. This looked much like a drawing room, something Lan SiZhui only seen in camps during the Sunshot Campaign. There was a table in the middle of it with papers all over it, while to the sides of the room there were shelves pushed to the walls, holding even more papers. Lan SiZhui didn’t even know where to start.

“SiZhui.” Jin Ling called and Lan SiZhui looked over, seeing him pointing at something near one of the shelves. It was a guqin stand with a dark guqin on it. As Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling got closer, they saw it was not only dark but pure black. Lan SiZhui ran his hand over the strings but couldn’t identify any spiritual energy inside.

“It’s dormant.” He told Jin Ling, who nodded and moved to the table. Lan SiZhui followed, seeing sheets upon sheets of guqin scores. Lan SiZhui quickly looked over them, only to realize something. “These are Lan teachings, though the writing and type of scores here suggest that whoever wrote these is not adapt at the guqin. If I didn’t know who had been here, I’d say this is the work of a young teenager.”

“Seems accurate.” Jin Ling grumbled, but Lan SiZhui decided to ignore the comment and concentrate on the contents of the sheets instead. They were not overly exciting. Some summoning scores looked like they might’ve been used to try draw the Yin Iron from Hudie, but Lan SiZhui wasn’t about to play them to prove it. Hudie was with him now, safe, so he had no reason to fear Su She and Jin GuangYao’s actions.

Still, the question lingered in his mind; just why did Jin GuangYao need the Yin Iron? To get power? To give it to Jin GuangShan? If that so, did Jin GuangShan also know about Lan SiZhui having the last shard? How did even Jin GuangYao know?

However, these questions could wait. Jin Ling moved to examine the papers on the shelves, so Lan SiZhui followed, partially because he was the one with the lantern. He placed it on a shelf where Jin Ling just took off some papers to read through them and Lan SiZhui also took a handful.

“These are reports.” Jin Ling said. “About the movements of the Wen during the war and also afterwards.” He flipped some papers, holding them towards the light. “Some of these must’ve been taken from the Wen themselves about their battle plans.”

“Is that important?” Lan SiZhui asked. He didn’t know much about these things.

“It’s strange.” Jin Ling said, strangely not snappish for once. He looked up and over at Lan SiZhui. “These should be in Koi Tower, probably at the document storage to be examined by tacticians. More so, they should have been burned after the war was over. There’s no point keeping them, unless they’re kept for future education.”

“Have you ever learned from these?” Lan SiZhui asked, gesturing at the papers in his own hand.

“No.” Jin Ling shook his head. “I didn’t even get to this part of my education yet.”

“Hm.” Lan SiZhui put the papers back and took some others. They also seemed to be of the same nature. Jin Ling moved around him, glancing at papers then dismissing them without consideration. They did this for a long time.

“Lan SiZhui! Jin Ling!” They suddenly heard Lan JingYi’s urgent whisper from downstairs. They exchanged a look, then Jin Ling dropped the papers he had been holding and hurried over to the stairs. Lan SiZhui followed, still clutching some papers.

“What?” Jin Ling asked, already halfway down the stairs.

“We found them!” Lan JingYi said excitedly. He then paused. “Ah, actually, Young Master Wei found them.”

“Show me.” Jin Ling demanded, Lan SiZhui on his heels. They looked at the letters Lan JingYi was holding together. They were unopened, but Lan SiZhui still recognized them. Some he sent, some he recognized as Jin Ling’s and Lan JingYi’s. “So, they really have been taking them.”

“Yes.” Lan JingYi nodded. “But I still don’t understand why.”

“My guess is that they needed to make people think the Wen refused to take his letters and bring ours, so they could put more blame on them.”

“Then why keep it?”

“To show as evidence on the trial.” Jin Ling said. His reasoning was sound. “If they say they found these with the Wen, I don’t know, hidden underneath some floorboards, then the Sects will think they purposefully prevented communication between Lan SiZhui and the rest of the world.” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. He didn’t like where this was going.

“But I’d have been there to deny it.” He said, hoping Jin Ling wouldn’t have a strong argument against this.

“You’re the least credible witness.” Jin Ling shook his head. “Remember, you’ve been supposedly manipulated into thinking the Wen were good, so you had to say they wouldn’t do this.”

“The Jin are definitely a snake’s pit, for all they claim to be a field of flowers.” Lan JingYi frowned. Lan SiZhui could only agree.

If Jin Ling was right, Jin GuangShan never planned on having a fair trial, or perhaps it was all Jin GuangYao’s doing. Lan SiZhui couldn’t be sure. All he knew was that they planned to kill the Wen, no matter what. He didn’t often share Jin Ling’s beliefs. He liked to see the better of people and not judge everyone based on others’ words or theories, but he had to realize perhaps his friends were right all along. He was too naïve to think they could save the Wen through righteous actions, but if this was true, not even Lan XiChen would’ve been able to stop the massacre.

“They wanted them dead all along.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“I’ve been telling you this since we started this.” Jin Ling said.

“You’re not helping.” Lan JingYi glared at him. Lan SiZhui ignored their bickering.

“I don’t understand. Wen Qing saved Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu. Wen Ning almost died to save me. They never did anything to earn this hatred.”

“SiZhui.” Jin Ling scoffed. “You’re too naïve. Who cares what they did or didn’t do? They’re Wen.”

“Do you also agree?” Lan SiZhui searched Jin Ling’s expression for the truth. “With your past, do you also agree they should all die?”

Jin Ling hesitated. Then, he sighed. “I would’ve said yes in the past.”

“And now?” Wei WuXian asked from where he stood behind Lan SiZhui, leaning against a table. Jin Ling made an annoyed expression, but didn’t comment on Wei WuXian involving himself in what was clearly a personal discussion.

“I still don’t like them!” Jin Ling threw up his hands, aggravated, then huffed. “But Lan SiZhui is my family, so if they die, he’s going to be upset. I hate when people are upset. They cry and look all sad.” He frowned. “I don’t want Lan SiZhui to be upset, so I don’t want the Wen to die. But it doesn’t mean that I’d mourn all of them if they did.”

“SiZhui.” Lan JingYi stepped closer. “When is the trial?”

“I think sometime after the banquet.” Lan SiZhui said. “I know ZeWu-Jun wants to be present, and Jin GuangShan wouldn’t want to keep him here for long, in case he learns something he isn’t supposed to.” Lan JingYi exchanged a look with Jin Ling.

There was a pause, during which Lan SiZhui considered his options. He didn’t want to cause trouble for the others, but he couldn’t leave the Wen here either. He had to do something about the situation. If he could only convince the Jin of the innocence of the Wen, he would be able to save them without having to fight. However, this seemed more and more distant of a possibility.

“Did you find anything else?” Lan JingYi asked Jin Ling.

“Just music notes and reports.” Jin Ling shook his head.

“We didn’t find anything else either.” Lan JingYi also shook his head. “What now? We didn’t find evidence we were looking for, nor any clues as to what his plan is.”

“Let’s go and talk to the Wen.” Lan SiZhui said. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling looked at him curiously. “Maybe they’ve heard something.” Lan SiZhui shrugged and Lan JingYi nodded.

“Alright. But let me talk to the Jin.”

“Have mercy on them.” Lan JingYi said as they followed Jin Ling outside. “They’re likely just following orders.”

“Yes!” Jin Ling exclaimed as they stepped outside. Apparently, while they were inside it had started to rain and now it fell in heavy, fat drops. “Dumb ones!” With this, Jin Ling headed straight towards where they had seen the Wen earlier, not caring about hiding anymore. The rest of them were left to follow and Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian exchanged an uneasy look.

Curiously they didn’t run into any Jin until they reached that area. They could tell the moment the guards have seen them, because they jumped on their feet from where they’ve been lounging under roofs of some of the buildings surrounding the area. Jin Ling strode towards them confidently.

“Hey!” He called out over the sound of the heavily falling rain. His words were followed by a thunder and for a moment Lan SiZhui felt as if Jin Ling could control the weather to make his entrance even more dramatic. The same thought must’ve occurred to Lan JingYi as well, because he glanced back at Lan SiZhui and rolled his eyes pointedly.

“Who are you?! You’re not supposed to be here!” One of the guards called out.

“Are you blind?!” Jin Ling called back. They soon reached the guards and stopped in front of them. “Or are you just stupid?!” Jin Ling glared. The guards exchanged a look.

“Sir, I’m not sure…”

“Not sure of what?!” Jin Ling cut him off. “That you’re blind or stupid?! Let me help: you’re both!”

“Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi sighed, holding his head. Lan SiZhui decided to step in, bowing to the guards as he stepped forward.

“Sirs, I’m Lan SiZhui and these are my companions. We’re here to speak with the Wen.”

“I don’t care who you are and who you want to speak with. You’re not allowed to be here.” The guard frowned at him, but the other looked from one of them to the other.

“Ah... ChunYu-Jun, MouShi, Feng CiKe, Young Master Wei, please forgive my senior for his rudeness.” He said. “According to our orders, we shouldn’t let anyone talk to the Wen right now.”

“It would be important to us to talk to them.” Lan SiZhui said.

“Ah, sirs... We must ask permission from our superiors first.” The second guard said apologetically.

“Why? So they can come here and stop us?” Jin Ling glared.

“Lan SiZhui?” They heard the voice from behind the Jin. Looking over, Lan SiZhui was relieved to see a familiar face.

“Wen Qing!” Lan SiZhui pushed past the soldiers, uncaring of their outraged cries.

Wen Qing looked horrible, with her hair sticking to her pale, bony face, a tattered rag serving as a cloak. As soon as Lan SiZhui reached her, her knees buckled and she almost fell onto the ground. Lan SiZhui caught her in time, holding her up so she wouldn’t end up in the mud.

“Lan SiZhui.” She gasped.

“Wen Qing, what happened to you?!” Lan SiZhui asked, looking around. He saw a building not far from them and dragged her over there so she could sit under some roof and on relatively dry ground. Behind them he could hear Jin Ling and Lan JingYi still arguing with the Jin, but soon Wei WuXian also crouched beside them and reached into his robes, pulling out a steamed bun.

“Here.” He handed it over. “I got this from Lanling before we departed. It should be fresh.”

Wen Qing looked at him strangely, but she still accepted, biting into it as if she haven’t eaten in a long time. Lan SiZhui reached up to hold her hand gently.

“Slower, you’ll make yourself sick.” Wen Qing glared at him, but she actually chewed her next bite, so he supposed she agreed. They waited until she ate a little, then Lan SiZhui asked again: “What happened?”

“These people are keeping us like animals.” She threw a glare behind Lan SiZhui, where he suspected the Jin were. “They give one half meal a day and tell us to work harder to earn more. We have to mine and other things.”

“Where is Wen Ning? The others? The child?” Lan SiZhui’s throat tightened at the question.

“Child?” Wei WuXian looked over at him, but Lan SiZhui ignored his question, keeping his attention on Wen Qing.

“A-Ning is resting. He had a fever a few days ago.” Lan SiZhui felt horrible for feeling relieved, but he supposed, at least Wen Ning wasn’t dead. If his fever was from the conditions here, that could be cured. “Hao YiFei and XiaoQiang...” She trailed off, looking helplessly at Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui waited for her to continue. However, when she didn’t, Lan SiZhui knew what she meant.

“B-But... Wen Ning was right there...” Lan SiZhui stuttered.

“So were you, yet look how that ended.” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened at hearing this.

Naturally, Wen Qing was right. Lan SiZhui was also right there. Wen Qing asked him to protect the family and he had failed at it. More so, he got them killed. It was lucky Wen Ning survived. Surely, if he died as well, Wen Qing would’ve greeted him with her fingers crawling at his eyes. Lan SiZhui wasn’t even sure why she wasn’t more mad now. Hao YiFei and her were close, probably the only person Lan SiZhui saw Wen Qing act as a friend. And Wen XiaoQiang was well-loved by everyone.

Wen Qing also closed her eyes for a long moment. “SiZhui, what else could you have done? You did everything you could. Wen Ning thought you were dead, when he saw you fall.”

“But I’m fine. And they’re dead instead.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“Don’t you ever say anything like this again.” Wen Qing glared at him. “A-Ning have been mourning you since we were dragged here, even though I kept telling him you were probably fine.”

“Sorry for causing you worry.” Lan SiZhui bowed awkwardly.

“How about the child?” Wei WuXian asked unexpectedly and the two turned towards him. “You spoke of a child. Are they also here?”

“Wei WuXian.” Wen Qing looked at him coldly. “SiZhui is stupid enough to come here, but why are you here?”

“Ah, didn’t you know?” Wei WuXian grinned. “No matter how stupid you think Lan SiZhui is, I can assure you, I’m three times as stupid.” Wen Qing rolled her eyes at this, turning back to Lan SiZhui.

“A-Yuan is fine.” Lan SiZhui blinked, barely registering the words, caught off-guard. For a moment he thought Wen Qing was talking about him. “He is with A-Ning. Him and granny are looking over him in turns, and the others also look after him sometimes.”

“Ah... A-Yuan?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused.

“Hao YiFei’s baby.” Wen Qing said. Lan SiZhui stared at her. “After you collapsed, A-Ning went to help XiaoQiang. They fought the Wen but lost. Hao YiFei kept telling him to save A-Yuan. They’ve decided to name him. They invited us for dinner so they could tell us.”



“Do you...” Lan SiZhui looked down, seeing his hand shake where he was resting it on his thigh. He pulled it back so the sleeve of his robes hid it from view. “Do you know of any other child named A-Yuan from your village?”

“What?” Wen Qing frowned at him, confused. “No.”

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui’s mouth dropped open and he could hardly think from the buzzing thoughts crowding his head.

“The guards don’t like to see or hear him.” Wen Qing said quietly. “He’s not safe here. Lan SiZhui.” She reached out and grabbed his arm. Lan SiZhui looked up, seeing the raw worry and sorrow on her expression. “Even if you don’t take anyone with you, please take him. The guards won’t mind. But I don’t want them to get tired of his crying and decide to take action.”

“I—” Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to say. His mind was still buzzing from learning the baby’s name.

“Wen Qing, we’re not leaving you here.” Wei WuXian said, sounding determined. Wen Qing scoffed.

“Wei WuXian, I don’t care about this.” She said. “I’m a cultivator and I’ve served in Wen RuoHan’s court. If you think this bothers me, you don’t know me.” She gestured around. “What are you going to do? Severe your ties with your Sect and run away with a bunch of Wen? Where would you even go? Think for once. You can take A-Yuan to anyone and they’ll agree to change his surname and raise him. It is not us who will lose their future if we stay here but him.”

“You shouldn’t have to endure this either.” Wei WuXian frowned.

“I shouldn’t have to endure your stupidity either.” She glared at him. For a moment, they were locked in a staring match, then there was movement behind them and Lan SiZhui turned to see Jin Ling and Lan JingYi come towards them with the guards on their heels.

“Lan SiZhui, Wei WuXian!” Jin Ling called over the sound of the heavy rain. “It is time to go!”

“We are not finished!” Wei WuXian called back, standing and turning to talk to Jin Ling. Lan SiZhui turned back to Wen Qing, who was looking at him with wide eyes.

“Please.” She pleaded and Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Don’t worry. No matter what, I’ll take A-Yuan away.” He promised and Wen Qing sagged with relief. Lan SiZhui reached out to support her weight.

“Yes, you are!” Jin Ling answered Wei WuXian in the background. “SiZhui, the guards want us gone. Now!” He snapped and Lan SiZhui gave Wen Qing’s hand one last squeeze, during which Lan SiZhui slid the bundle of talismans Lan JingYi had prepared for the Wen, into Wen Qing’s hand. She looked down, her eyes widening, but she was thankfully a quick

thinker and covered the talismans with her sleeve before the guards could catch a glimpse. They exchanged one last look, Wen Qing mouthing ‘thank you’ to him, to which Lan SiZhui nodded, then he let go and stood. He took hold of Wei WuXian’s arm.

“Let’s go.” He said quietly. Wei WuXian looked at him like he betrayed him. “Brother Wei, if the Jin call for reinforcements, it would not end well for us.” He told him quietly. “Please, let’s go. We will figure it out later.”

“Fine.” Wei WuXian frowned, looking back at Wen Qing. Lan SiZhui also took a glance, seeing her bury her face in her knees. “Lady Wen, don’t worry. We’ll get you out of here.” Wei WuXian said, but Wen Qing didn’t react. Lan SiZhui tugged at Wei WuXian’s arm and the two of them joined Jin Ling and Lan JingYi.

“Let’s go.” Jin Ling said, then turned and walked back towards where they came from. The three of them followed, being shadowed by the Jin guards. They passed between buildings they had been hiding behind when they went inside. The guards didn’t follow them further, but it seemed Jin Ling wouldn’t care either way.

They didn’t stop until they were at the horses behind the mound. There, Jin Ling halted suddenly, though from the momentum of his walk, Lan SiZhui thought for a moment that he was going to walk all the way to Lanling. He swirled around and pinned Lan SiZhui with a glare.

“Is he dead?” He demanded in a harsh tone.

“Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi frowned at him. Jin Ling cast him a dismissive look, then turned back to Lan SiZhui.

“Something she said upset you.” Jin Ling stated confidently. “Don’t even try to deny it. I know you. I can see it on your face. What was it? Is Wen Ning dead?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, trying to collect himself and school his features. “It’s just, the Wen are not kept ideally.”

“What did you expect? Silk sheets and golden trays?” Jin Ling frowned, his muscles losing tension. “Lan SiZhui, you can’t get upset over every little thing.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Lan SiZhui, you dragged me away even though Wen Qing needed us.” Wei WuXian said. Clearly, unlike Jin Ling, he didn’t lose the tension. “What are you planning to do?”

“Yes, Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling frowned. “What are you going to do now, that you’ve seen how the Wen are kept?”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and swallowed. He knew he needed to give them answers, but he honestly had none. He wanted to do this the right way, but this day proved him that was not possible, or at least it would take much more than the four of them. They

needed to find some leverage. For some reason, this made him think of the letters, and that led to another thought.

“Lan JingYi, do you have the letters?”

“Here.” Lan JingYi pulled the letters from his sleeve, handing them over to Lan SiZhui. He was aware of Wei WuXian looking over his shoulder as he opened them, but he didn’t care much, for he was not going to read them. He opened the first, then handed over to Lan JingYi when he saw his familiar handwriting. He did the same with the others, recognizing them indeed as Lan JingYi’s, Jin Ling’s and his. Disappointed, he handed over the last one as well.

“What?” Jin Ling asked, also looking over them.

“I was hoping the letter Jin GuangShan claimed they’ve gotten from a friend of mine is amongst them. That would’ve proven it was not someone I’m familiar with who wrote it.”

“Ah, smart!” Lan JingYi nodded, then looked down at the letters. “But these are just the letters we’ve been sending each other but never arrived.”

“He probably destroyed it.” Jin Ling said.

“But that was the only thing that would’ve justified the Jin in going to the Wen village.” Lan JingYi said. “It wouldn’t make sense to destroy it.”

“It would be worse if they had it.” Jin Ling shook his head. “Think about it. If they had the letter and Lan SiZhui said it didn’t belong to the person who signed it, then that would’ve discredited Jin GuangShan.”

“Jin Ling is right.” Wei WuXian agreed. “With the letter missing, they can claim innocence and say if it’s missing, you can’t prove it wasn’t one of us who wrote it.”

“But with the letter missing, they also have no proof it ever existed.” Lan JingYi looked between them confused.

“Probably a bunch of people were present when Jin GuangShan read it or a lot of people saw it before it got delivered.” Jin Ling shook his head.

Lan SiZhui agreed. It was a good idea, but with the letter missing, it only stayed that; an idea of a credible defense. He had to face the truth and admit there was very little choice to be made. He couldn’t go and plead his case to Lan XiChen.

The Lan Sect was still in a fragile state after the war. If Jin GuangShan didn’t approve of the Lan taking custody of the Wen, they could be facing another war. Lan SiZhui was in a dubious relationship with the Jiang; some liked him, some didn’t. The louder voice was the one that disliked him. Nie MingJue wanted nothing with the Wen and Lan SiZhui was sure he’d rather allow his brother to lose himself to art than take in a bunch of Wen.

However, there was still the issue of Lan JingYi and Jin Ling being too loyal. If Lan SiZhui decided to take the Wen away forcefully, they would still follow him, even though Jin Ling disliked the Wen and Lan JingYi had a good life as Lan XiChen’s right hand. He supposed

even Wei WuXian would come, out of some sort of sense of duty. Lan SiZhui didn't want any of them to suffer the consequences of his own decision.

"Jin Ling, what are the chances that some way we could turn the trial in our favor?"

"How would I know?!" Jin Ling glared. "What am I, a lawyer?!"

"You're the only one who knows the Jin this way." Lan SiZhui said.

"Well, I don't know!" Jin Ling threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. He turned and walked away from them, then back. "If somehow we could turn the public opinion on our side, Jin GuangShan wouldn't want to go against this, but then there would be a chance he would try to sabotage anyways."

"But that doesn't mean this is a completely lost cause?" Lan SiZhui asked, hopefully.

"Of course it is!" Jin Ling frowned. "Lan SiZhui, in the end we really are going to ignite another war and Lan JingYi will be right. That would be horrible!"

"You're seriously more afraid of me being right than an actual war?" Lan JingYi raised his eyebrows high. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"Naturally, I'm not afraid of you being right, since it's impossible."

"Hey!" Lan JingYi protested, offended. "I've been right plenty of times. I was the one who figured out where we are, if you recall."

"I do not." Jin Ling informed him with a glare. Lan SiZhui huffed, annoyed.

"JingYi, Jin Ling, can we concentrate?"

"SiZhui, how could I concentrate when he's constantly being rude?!" Lan JingYi turned to him with wide eyes.

"I'm the one being rude?!" Jin Ling looked Lan JingYi up and down. "Are you joking?"

"Are we going to trial or are we freeing them now?" Wei WuXian cut through their bickering and the three of them turned to look at him. "I'd rather fight, if you take votes." He grinned at Lan SiZhui, but it was Jin Ling who reacted, rolling his eyes.

"Even if we do take votes, yours wouldn't count."

"*We* are not fighting." Lan SiZhui said, ignoring Jin Ling's comment. He took a deep breath and said the last decision. "We go back to Lanling. Let us talk to ZeWu-Jun and see what he thinks of this."

"What can he do besides standing between you and Jin GuangShan to take the blame?" Jin Ling scoffed. "More so, he can't even do that since you're no longer his disciple. Remember SiZhui, you left your precious Sect." Lan SiZhui nodded.

“I’m aware.” He said. “But what other choice do we have?” He looked around helplessly. “The Wen need to get away from here, and I won’t endanger you by my earlier plans.”

“Well, whether you chose to do it, we would be with you.” Lan JingYi said. “We don’t care about the danger.”

Lan SiZhui nodded, knowing this. “That is exactly why I can’t make that decision.” He said. For a long moment, Jin Ling studied him with furrowed brows. Then, he sighed and nodded.

“Fine. I wasn’t expecting anything different anyways. Lan SiZhui, model disciple of the Lan Sect, always has to do the right thing, even if there’s a bigger chance of failure than success.”

“Why must you be such a downer?” Lan JingYi grumbled. Jin Ling rolled his eyes and headed towards his horse. Lan JingYi followed.

“Why must you tell me off for every word I say?” Jin Ling countered. “Are you my father?”

“Your father should tell you off for every little thing.” Lan JingYi said as they untied their horse, Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian following suit. “Maybe then you’d have some actual manners.”

“I have perfectly fine manners.” Jin Ling puffed as they mounted their horses. “The Jin Sect is one of the greatest gentry Sects. Are you implying our education is lacking?! Don’t forget who you’re talking to, Lan JingYi!”

“SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui turned, seeing Wei WuXian nudging his horse to ride beside Lan SiZhui’s. They were slower than Jin Ling and Lan JingYi, who were too preoccupied with their argument to listen to them. Their voices faded as they rode ahead. “Are you sure this is the best decision?” Wei WuXian asked. “Wen Qing asked us to take the child away. What if something happens while we’re playing politics and diplomacy in Koi Tower?” He frowned, real worry coloring his features. Lan SiZhui felt for him.

“Brother Wei, I cannot promise a lot of things regarding the future,” Lan SiZhui felt the irony in that statement, “but I can promise you one thing. I will not let any harm come to that child or my cousins.”

“Yes.” Wei WuXian nodded. “But how are you going to ensure it from all the way from Lanling?”

“Lan JingYi had been practicing talismans. I’m not claiming he got better at it than you, but he’s pretty adapt at this point. Before we departed Koi Tower, he gave me some talismans to pass to the Wen. Some of them were messenger talismans, some protection wards. Since Wen Qing is a cultivator, she’ll also know what they’re for. I’m confident she’s going to know what they’re for.”

“When did you give her talismans? I didn’t see it.” Wei WuXian frowned at him. Lan SiZhui smiled.

“While you weren’t looking, just before we left.” He admitted. Wei WuXian made a thoughtful noise, but then he nodded.

“Alright. If you’re sure, then that should buy us some time.” He paused. “Lan SiZhui, I cannot make many promises either. But I can promise you one thing.” He paused again and Lan SiZhui looked over, curious, only to find Wei WuXian looking at him seriously. Once he had Lan SiZhui’s attention, Wei WuXian continued. “If this plan fails, I am going to come back for them.”

Lan SiZhui nodded, not about to dismiss this promise. “I only hope there won’t be a reason for you to come back.”

“Me too, Lan SiZhui.” Wei WuXian said.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

They rode on in silence for a while, the only noise disturbing the rhythmic thumps of the horses’ hooves on the ground Jin Ling and Lan JingYi’s occasional chatter. It could be even called idyllic if it wasn’t for the tension in the air and around them. All of them were anxious for one reason or another, though Lan SiZhui guessed in Jin Ling and Wei WuXian’s case, it was more like anger. Still, it wasn’t a peaceful ride, despite the silence surrounding them.

Since the road was easy and they went via horses, they didn’t need to stop often. However, even just riding a horse could be tiring and uncomfortable after a while, so they stopped occasionally for a breather. They dismounted, letting the horses graze from the grass while they sat on some rocks by the side of the road. It was still raining, though not as heavily as it had been in Qiongqi.

“Ah, my waterskin is empty.” Lan SiZhui said, looking into his flask. He looked up and around. “There should be a river somewhere here.”

“I don’t know this place well.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“I’ll go, see if I can find it.” Lan SiZhui offered.

“SiZhui, you can have some of mine.” Lan JingYi held out his, shaking it to show there was water in it.

“If I drink yours, we won’t have any left.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I’m sure there is a river somewhere around here.”

“Alright.” Jin Ling sighed, pushing to his feet. “Let’s look for it then.” Lan SiZhui considered protesting, but he knew it would be in vain. He sighed and nodded, going over and picking up the reins of his horse.

“We should go in different directions, see if one of us finds it. Let us meet here in an hour.”

“SiZhui, it’s raining. In an hour my waterskin will get full of rainwater if I leave it here by the road. Are we really going to look for a river for an hour?” Wei WuXian asked, frowning. Lan SiZhui felt anxiety and guilt building up in his gut. He shrugged, feigning ignorance.

“Then stay here and fill your waterskin with rain while we look for a river.” Jin Ling said. “See how sick you will be, once we’re back!”

“Isn’t it worse to walk in the rain than sit in it?” Wei WuXian asked.

“How would I know? Am I a doctor?” Jin Ling called over his shoulder, already heading in a direction. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look, then watched as Wei WuXian grumbled, then he carefully leaned his waterskin against the rock he’d been sitting at.

“Jin Ling, wait!” He called out, hurrying after him. “I’ll come with!”

“Who wants you to go with them?!” Jin Ling exclaimed as if Wei WuXian insulted his mother. “I was happy to get rid of you for an hour! Go back to your horse and wait for us here!”

“But MouShi, I’ve never even learned your courtesy name!” Wei WuXian pouted, more for show than genuine. “Let me come with, let us become true friends and sworn brothers!”

“Who would want to be even near you much less friends or sworn brothers with you?!”

With this, the two of them got too far for Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi to hear through the pounding rain. They exchanged a look and Lan JingYi shrugged.

“If they kill each other, at least we’ll have two problems less.”

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui scolded disapprovingly, but Lan JingYi just grinned at him.

The two of them headed into different directions anyways, so soon Lan JingYi waved to him through the trees and disappeared from view. Lan SiZhui smiled in his direction for a long time, then also proceeded.

He led his horse forward. They walked for a while until they reached the road again. Lan SiZhui looked around and listened, but he didn’t hear anyone else. He took a deep breath, looking back into the forest once more, considering what he was about to do one last time.

He knew his friends wouldn’t approve; maybe not even Wei WuXian. But he couldn’t let them come with him. The trial was hopeless, he knew. He truly wanted to believe that he would be able to convince the Jin about the innocence of the Wen, but something, a feeling told him he couldn’t. He had always spent too much time hesitating and it often got him into situations that didn’t end good. He knew this. His biggest failure had been Mo Manor, but it wasn’t the only one. If he didn’t hesitate so much on the night Lan JingYi brought *Spring Again* to his rooms and told him no right away, maybe they wouldn’t have ended up in the past. If he didn’t hesitate to change the past, they could’ve stopped the war before it happened, as Jin Ling said.

He only hoped this time he made the right choice. This was not a good choice. He was aware of that. He knew the consequences of his actions, which is why he left the Sect in the first place. Maybe that was the moment he decided to do this and only now did he realize why he did it. Lan SiZhui couldn’t spend more time on the maybes though. He had decided what to

do, so he was going to do this. It might be a terrible idea, and it was possible Jin Ling and Lan JingYi would reach him sooner than he even got back to Qiongqi. But now he'd committed to it.

He exhaled and mounted his horse. He barely even landed in the saddle when he kicked the horse's flank. The grey mare Lan SiZhui got pulled its ears back, but after a little jump, it began to gallop in earnest, back the way they came, in the pouring rain, towards Qiongqi Path, towards where the Wen waited for justice that wouldn't be served by those who swore to act righteous.



## Ambivalence I.

Lan SiZhui's horse barely came to a stop as he was already dismounting. To be honest, he had no idea what was the next step. He didn't plan so far ahead. While they were riding back towards Lanling, Lan SiZhui was busy planning how to get away from his friends and didn't have time to plan how to get back into the camp and take the Wen away before Jin Ling and the others caught up with him.

Now he rushed over to the mound, not even caring he left his horse untied. He looked over the compound, thinking hard on how to get inside. He could use resentful energy to distract the guards, but then they'd be alarmed and might call for help. Lan SiZhui couldn't afford to fight the Jin again.

He would need to consider more mundane means to get inside. Sneaking in was pretty much out of the question with his Lan robes. The guards were also evenly spaced around the perimeter and paying attention.

Lan SiZhui sneaked into the valley, going behind some buildings, hiding in their shadows as he edged closer, so he could observe their behavior. He was no Jin Ling, but he'd been Lan JingYi's friend for over a decade and despite his reputation, Lan SiZhui had gotten into plenty trouble because of his friend in the past. Lan JingYi had the ability to talk Lan SiZhui into things he would otherwise not do – Grandmaster Lan wanted to separate them many times due to this, but Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun were in agreement that Lan JingYi was a good friend for Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui didn't know why the Twin Jades thought so, he never asked. Perhaps when they go home, he could inquire about it.

Shaking off the irrelevant thoughts, Lan SiZhui watched as the guards stood, their wide-brimmed hats protecting them from the heavy rainfall, unlike Lan SiZhui, who felt his clothes sticking to his damp skin. He watched the movements of the guards steadily, seeing one yawn into his hand. Another lit a pipe, pulling into the cover of a building's roof to keep it dry.

Minutes passed without any other movement and Lan SiZhui was ready to give up. These guards were not moving from their spot. Knowing his luck, he just arrived after shift change and the guards would stay for hours more before Lan SiZhui got a window of opportunity. Disappointed and feeling a sense of urgency, Lan SiZhui looked around. The houses were obviously built in a hurried matter. From some windows lantern light leaked out into the moody darkness. Lan SiZhui heard laughter from one of them. A window opened at another.

A thought occurred Lan SiZhui. He was in Lan clothes, so he could not get past the guards unnoticed. However, if he was in a guard's clothing... Lan SiZhui crept closer to one of the houses that was dark and quiet. Lan SiZhui laid his palm against the wood. It felt cold to the touch, so most likely nobody was inside. He stood under the window, listening. There were no voices coming from inside. Lan SiZhui pushed the shutters open and peeked inside, and this confirmed that it was indeed empty. He gripped the ledge, kicking himself off the ground, he pulled himself up, and inside.

Unfortunately, the house was not only vacant of people, but also of personal items and clutter. Lan SiZhui successfully broke into an uninhabited house. Still, he took his chances. On light feet he walked around, looking into cupboards. He got lucky, as in one, he even found some cloths.

They were thrown carelessly into the bottom of the wardrobe, a crumpled, dark red cloak full of holes. Lan SiZhui raised it and shook it out. It wasn't the best disguise he ever had and it smelled wrong, stale and moldy. But Lan SiZhui had hardly any other choice. He put it around his shoulders, pulling it closed on his front. He flicked the hood of the cloak on top of his head. The material was scratchy and rough. Lan SiZhui ignored the uncomfortable sensation as he considered his next steps.

He could sneak out the window and approach the guards from the outside, but if he went out the front door, he would already be inside their circle. On the other hand, if he was seen exiting an abandoned house, people would immediately know he was not from amongst them. However, Lan SiZhui was willing to take this chance. He sneaked over to the door, plastering his ear to the wood, listening to see if he could hear others outside. The only thing he heard, however, was the pitter-patter of the rain outside, knocking on the roof above him and muffled on the mud.

Lan SiZhui pushed the door open, hiding for now as it swung open. If someone was outside, they would come and close the door. Nothing happened for a long minute, so Lan SiZhui chanced a look outside. The rain obscured his vision, limiting it for only a few meters of visibility. Lan SiZhui stepped outside, then he turned and pulled the door closed quietly. However, before he could finish, there was a shout behind him.

"Hey! What are you doing here?!" Lan SiZhui froze with his hand on the wood, his back to the threat. He shouldn't have turned his back. If Jin Ling was here, he'd reprimand him for his mistake. "I'm talking to you! Turn around, who are you?!"

Lan SiZhui slowly turned, looking at the guard. He was most likely a high-ranked individual, but Lan SiZhui didn't recognize him, which most likely meant he was not there when they had been. Lan SiZhui swallowed. The guard scoffed, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"You're trying to escape, Wen dog?!" He stepped closer. Lan SiZhui paused. He didn't know why the man thought he was a Wen, but perhaps he could use this to his advantage. He lowered his eyes and dropped his shoulders. The guard pulled out his sword. "I should cut you down where you stand. You're lucky Sect Leader Jin is so merciful, he would not be pleased. Move!" The man held his sword outstretched towards Lan SiZhui, so he bowed his head and stepped down, into the mud. His boots sank into the mushy substance, but Lan SiZhui didn't mind; at least like this, their white coloring would not be so obvious.

The man stepped up to him and gripped the cloths around his shoulder, turning him and pushing. Lan SiZhui lost his balance and fell on his knees. The guard snorted.

"You Wen dogs are so pathetic. It is a wonder the main Sects were scared of you. And to think this war lasted for months! If it wasn't for your evil Sect Leader, you wouldn't have even been able to touch us, much less kill any of us." The guards kicked Lan SiZhui, so he ended up with his whole front in the mud. He squeezed his eyes shut as pain bloomed where

the guard kicked him, then he pushed himself up, spitting out some mud that got into his mouth. "What are you waiting for?! I said move! You're going back where you belong." The guard ordered and waited for Lan SiZhui to stand.

As Lan SiZhui pushed himself up, he barely just got on his feet before there was a kick to his left knee, and his feet gave out. He fell onto the ground once more, grunting as the impact bruised his knees. His left leg was the one that had been broken by Wen Xu before the indoctrination, and now it throbbed with phantom pain from the fall. He gritted his teeth and ignored the snickering guard as he got on his feet again.

"Move!" The guard barked at him and Lan SiZhui did, heading towards the direction of the Wen. The guard didn't hit him again, thankfully, and they soon reached the line of guards. Lan SiZhui kept his head bowed, hoping the others wouldn't recognize him from earlier.

"Brother!" One of them called out. His voice was familiar. He was the guard that first stopped them. Lan SiZhui reached up and pulled the hood deeper into his face. "What is the meaning of this?" The guard asked as they got closer. "Who is this?"

"I caught him sneaking around." The high-ranked guard at Lan SiZhui's back said as he also stopped in front of the other. "He was trying to sneak into one of the houses."

"How did he get out?" A third Jin asked, coming closer from his spot a few meters away.

"He probably sneaked away while those bastard cultivators were here and distracted us." Lan SiZhui's guard said, taking hold of Lan SiZhui. "Keep an eye on him!"

"Yes." The guards nodded, and then Lan SiZhui was pushed, encouraged to move past them. Lan SiZhui paused, unsure how to proceed, but then the guard stepped forward as well, right behind Lan SiZhui.

"What? You want some more punishment?!" The Jin snarled, but Lan SiZhui didn't. He quickly moved, going further into the compound. He was successful. He hardly believed it as he moved away from the guards and closer to the Wen he saw walking around there. Perhaps, he wasn't as helpless as Jin Ling thought him to be. This filled him with some sense of relief, but also embarrassment; he shouldn't be proud to be good at sneaking around.

Ignoring his guilt and the guards indulging in light chatter behind him, Lan SiZhui took a look around, searching for a specific person amongst the Wen. Wen Qing was not on the porch they left her last time and Lan SiZhui didn't see her around either, so he moved between the Wen to find her, looking all of them in the face. Some received his sight with surprise and shock. Others ignored him altogether. Lan SiZhui didn't mind either way.

He was about to ask someone if they knew where his cousin was when he finally saw her. She was walking amongst her people as well, stopping to talk here and there, seemingly checking everyone if they had need for anything or if they were fine. Lan SiZhui moved towards her with purpose this time. Despite being here and being humiliated and hurt, Lan SiZhui couldn't let misery swallow him. He needed to remember why he was here and that he had his weapons on him.

Wen Qing was talking to one of the prisoners when Lan SiZhui reached her. As he stepped closer, the man Wen Qing was talking to trailed off in his speech. Wen Qing turned to Lan SiZhui, her expression annoyed as she drew in a breath, probably preparing to tell whoever dared to disturb her to get lost. However, the moment she saw him her eyes widened and her hand gripped the other man's arm tightly.

"SiZhui." She breathed. The sound was difficult to hear over the pounding rain. "You're back."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded. "As I told you I would." Wen Qing watched him for a long moment without speaking, so Lan SiZhui decided to take matters into his own hands and stepped closer. "Cousin, may I see Wen Ning... And A-Yuan?"

"Mn." She nodded stiffly before turning to the other man. He patted her hand on his arm and smiled, nodding in understanding. Lan SiZhui offered him a bow. The man nodded to him as well, then extracted his arm from Wen Qing's hold and walked away. Wen Qing turned back to Lan SiZhui. She opened her mouth, about to say something, then she shook her head and turned, walking away briskly, with purpose. Lan SiZhui followed.

They went towards the houses in the middle of the camp. They were in slightly worse condition than the guards' rooms, but they still provided shelter and protection from the elements. Wen Qing went over to the third building in this row and stepped up to the door. She glanced back at Lan SiZhui, then laid her head on the door as she knocked a few times. After a moment of pause, she pushed the door open. Lan SiZhui followed her inside.

The house was obviously not built for comfort, but the Wen did what they could. The room was warm, with a lantern illuminating the insides. There were protection talismans hung on the walls. Lan SiZhui recognized them as the talismans he handed Wen Qing earlier that day and he was relieved to see she did indeed know what to do with them. There were two beds inside on opposite sides of the room. In one a figure was laying under some cloths. Lan SiZhui rushed over.

"Wen Ning!" He dropped on his knees by the bed. Wen Ning was awake and he looked at Lan SiZhui with a shocked expression. Then his face softened and he smiled widely.

"Lan SiZhui!" He tried to sit up but clearly had difficulty. Lan SiZhui reached over and supported him while Wen Qing reached behind him and stacked some clothes behind him to rest against. She was clearly displeased that Wen Ning decided to sit up, but she just threw him a sharp look, not commenting on it. "Lan SiZhui, you're here." Wen Ning smiled at him warmly once he was sitting upright. Lan SiZhui returned the smile, feeling bittersweet about their reunion.

"Wen Ning, how are you feeling?" He asked, sitting back on his haunches. Wen Ning glanced over at his sister, who raised challenging eyebrows.

"Ah, I had a fever a few days ago. I'm much better now, though still a little weak." He shrugged. "Lan SiZhui, how are you here?" He asked, confused. Lan SiZhui looked over at Wen Qing, seeing her also looking at him curiously.

“I’ve come back for you.” Lan SiZhui told them honestly. There was no point lying. “I’ve made several mistakes in the past. Not protecting you was one of them, so I’m here to right my wrongs.”

“Lan SiZhui, don’t be stupid.” Wen Qing frowned at him. “This is hardly on you.” She gestured around. Lan SiZhui bowed his head in shame.

“It might be.” He admitted. “Truth is, we don’t know for sure.”

“How so?” Wen Ning inquired. Lan SiZhui sighed, deciding to share as much as he could with the siblings.

“During the Sunshot Campaign I have gained a few enemies within our ranks. One of them is a cunning person with high ambitions towards Sect Leader Jin. He’s seeking Sect Leader Jin’s approval, or at least we think this is his motive. He is the only one we know of who is capable of such plot. We’ve discovered he’d been seizing our letters to each other – Jin Ling’s and Lan JingYi’s as well as mine.”

“That is why you never received any letters from them while you stayed with us.” Wen Ning realized, his eyes wide. Lan SiZhui nodded, looking over at Wen Qing.

“When the Jin came into the village that day, they said they were there because they received a letter from a friend of mine, saying I’ve been manipulated by the Wen to stay with them. This is why they were willing to fight us. In reality, when I asked Jin GuangShan about the letter, he was unable to show me, for it was stolen.” He paused.

“So, you think this enemy of yours used your connection to the Wen to seize us.” Wen Qing summarized and Lan SiZhui nodded. She frowned. “How would this be against you or in Jin GuangShan’s favor?”

“Since you’re my family, it would naturally hurt me if you were captured and held prisoners – more so, if you got executed.” Lan SiZhui hesitated. “As for how it would appeal to Jin GuangShan... The Sects are not happy with the Wen. Any excuse to contain and kill them is welcome within the cultivation world.”

“How did you end up tangled in such an elaborate plot?” Wen Qing furrowed her brows. She then shook her head. “However, all of that doesn’t matter. That is your problem.” She said. “Lan SiZhui, you’ve been honest with us, so I’m going to be honest with you as well. I don’t care who and why keeps us here. I only care that my family stay alive.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, the least surprised by that. “That’s why I’m here now.” He admitted. Wen Qing’s gaze became sharp immediately. Lan SiZhui had a feeling what was coming, so he tried to go ahead her disapproval. “We’ve tried to free you by legal means. I’ve consulted with Sect Leader Lan about your situation. It... doesn’t look good.” He confessed. “The issue is that the Jin insist you’ve fought them and killed their people when they took us away. Because of this, you’ve broken their conditions of leaving you alone. Now they wish for you to repay the damage caused.

“You’ve acted in self-defense, but the Jin would never believe you if you said that and the Jin would most certainly not admit their wrong. We had one leverage against them: the letter they claimed came from a friend that ignited this whole thing. However, the letter got stolen right after I arrived to Koi Tower. Most likely several people saw Jin GuangShan having it or receiving, or even reading it, so the only way we could claim it was fake if we had it and I could pinpoint it was not one of my friends who wrote it. However, with the letter missing, that is impossible.”

“So, we will be executed.” Wen Qing stated, her voice devoid of emotions. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath. This was the hard part. Lan SiZhui didn’t expect to be able to convince Wen Qing of his plan, but he had to try.

“Cousin...” He began. “As a part of the Wen Clan, I ask you to let me help.” Lan SiZhui bowed his head. “I know you do not want nor need my help. However, I know how this ends. I do not wish to see my family die again.” He paused. “I know I’m asking much in asking for your trust. I will cause a dept between us, but as your family, I would not see it as such. I’d see it as my duty to help. I’ve not looked for the Wen in fifteen years because I didn’t know my origins. I’ve neglected to provide and help. With this, I’d be repaying my dept towards you.” He looked up at her, where she was looking down at him, her eyes sharp and studying him. “Let me help. Let me take you and your family away.”

Wen Qing was quiet for a long time. Wen Ning squirmed on the bed, trying to peek at Wen Qing’s reaction, but he didn’t speak either, understanding this decision was his sister’s. Wen Qing exhaled slowly.

“We’ve done nothing wrong. If the Jin execute us, they will be committing a crime of their own.”

“They don’t care.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “They see it as a righteous action, since you’re Wen. They see all of them the same.”

“Their bigoted views are none of my business.” Wen Qing said. Lan SiZhui huffed.

“Sister.” Wen Ning unexpectedly spoke up. “What about A-Yuan?”

“Lan SiZhui can take him away.” Wen Qing said sharply. “After all, a year-old baby cannot be blamed for the deaths of the Jin. He also promised to do so.” She cut a look towards Lan SiZhui, who nodded.

“But only six of us fought the Jin that day.” Wen Ning said quietly. “Yet they took the whole village. Innocents will die.”

“So we will tell the Jin it was only the six of us who were guilty.” She said. “Surely, they would not dare to fight us on this matter.”

“Do you think they would care?” Lan SiZhui asked, feeling anger well inside his chest. “You would sacrifice your whole Clan, just to keep me out of trouble?!”

“Watch your mouth!” Wen Qing snapped. “Keep you out of trouble?! Do I care about you so much? Lan SiZhui, you’re older than me, yet you never see the bigger picture. You say you’ll free us and take us away. Where? The whole cultivation world will be after us. We will need to hide. People would recognize us, so we cannot settle in villages. We would need to start a new life somewhere desolate. And if they find us, it will be all in vain. We would need a place where we could protect ourselves. What kind of life would that be?! Are you willing to subject the old and young to this kind of life?!”

Lan SiZhui clenched his jaw. “It is better to be alive to have a life than die without good reason.”

“It is better to die without good reason than live a life we cannot live fully.”

“Is it?!” Lan SiZhui snapped, glaring. Wen Qing returned his gaze, some well-hidden surprise within her look. Lan SiZhui bowed his head, refusing to apologize but feeling bad about snapping. Wen Qing huffed.

“You are terrified.” She stated. Lan SiZhui looked up at her in surprise. She raised her eyebrows.

“I’ve lost my family four times now.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “I can’t bear the thought of losing it again.”

“This is not your responsibility. *We* are not your responsibility.”

“You are.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “More than perhaps even I realized.” This wasn’t only about him wanting to save Wen Ning and Wen Qing’s lives. It was also about Wei WuXian.

The YiLing Patriarch had saved the Wen in the past. Even though they struggled, they lived under his protection for a long time. Even though there were people who died of malnutrition, they have at least died as free men and women. Wen Ning and Wen Qing also made the decision to sacrifice themselves freely. Now Wei WuXian was not the YiLing Patriarch, no matter he practiced demonic cultivation. He was not here to help the Wen as he had in the past. It might’ve been partially because of Lan SiZhui’s manipulation that he wasn’t here, but Lan SiZhui looked out for his interest as well.

Wei WuXian had lost a lot with the decision to save the Wen – his Sect, his family, his happiness. Lan SiZhui had no such ties in this life, his only family present were Jin Ling and Lan JingYi and the Wen. He would not loose Jin Ling and Lan JingYi – at least he didn’t think he would – so it made more sense for him to give up his few ties to this timeline than for Wei WuXian to lose it all over again.

Wen Qing said he didn’t see the big picture, but it was not true. Lan SiZhui knew exactly what he was doing. He didn’t know if this was the right decision, but he had no doubt about his abilities. He was from the future, so he knew more than any of them in this time. With Wei WuXian, Wen Qing’s concerns would be valid. However, it was not Wei WuXian here.

Lan SiZhui felt irritated, because back then in the past Wen Qing trusted Wei WuXian to take them away without putting up such fight, or so he assumed – of course back then Wen Ning

was dead and she was grieving. Lan SiZhui couldn't understand why Wen Qing fought him so much on this – on this and every other thing Lan SiZhui brought up. It was as if whatever he said, Wen Qing said the opposite. It was getting on Lan SiZhui's nerves.

“Do you truly find me so irresponsible that you don't trust I'd be able to take you away and protect you?” He asked, looking into Wen Qing's eyes. She furrowed her brows.

“Lan SiZhui, irresponsible is the last thing that comes to mind when I think of you. The first one, however, is indecisive and soft.”

Lan SiZhui frowned. “You refuse because I asked instead of telling you I'd be saving you?” He asked in disbelief. Wen Qing rolled her eyes.

“I'd also refuse if you were 'telling me', not 'asking me'.” She said. “However, Lan SiZhui, yes. I have a hard time believing you'd be willing to do whatever it takes. You simply don't have it in you. There's nothing wrong with that. However, it would cause more issues than resolutions.”

Lan SiZhui frowned, disagreeing with this analysis. “I am willing to do what it takes. However, if I can avoid complications along the way, why shouldn't I?” Lan SiZhui paused. “Originally I didn't break you out of here on my own volition because Jin Ling and Lan JingYi were with me. If they were to come with, Jin Ling would give you and Wen Ning a hard time. Lan JingYi would have to answer Sect Leader Lan for his actions and ultimately either betray the Lan Sect and leave or betray us and chance the Wen's survival again. We originally came here to gather information on our enemies and hopefully find something to aid us on the trial. However, we didn't find anything we could use, so in the end, I had to sneak away from them to come here.

“I admit that oftentimes I'm unconfident and I don't like violence. However, if I decide on something, I barely back down, even if it makes me uncomfortable. You don't know this because we don't know each other well.” He paused. “I promised I'd keep A-Yuan safe. I also promise I'll do my best to keep you and your family, our family safe. You refuse to trust me on this, but I refuse to leave you here to your fate again.”

Wen Qing watched him for a long time, her eyes narrowed as she studied Lan SiZhui. After minutes have probably passed, she looked away, her jaw working. Then she nodded stiffly.

“You're not willing to let this go. I can see that.” She said. “For the sake of my family, fine. So be it. If they get to be safe then I'm willing to do this with you.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then stood. “We should go as soon as possible. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Wei WuXian had most likely figured out where I am already and they're well on their way here. I do not wish to drag them into this, although they'll likely involve themselves anyways. Still, it's better to get a head start.”

“Do you even know where we will be going?” She asked, turning to him suddenly. Lan SiZhui sighed.



“I have a destination in mind. It is not ideal and most likely we will suffer a lot before we become comfortable there.”

“Where is that place?” Wen Qing frowned. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“For now, let’s just get out of here. We will worry about the rest later. I have a plan.” Sort of. Lan SiZhui had an outline of an idea of a plan. He didn’t know if it was executable at all, but he didn’t want to say until they were out of danger.

Wen Qing seemingly disliked his tight-lipped approach, but she kept her comments to herself and nodded. “A-Ning, can you walk?”

“Mn.” Wen Ning nodded, pushing the cloths that served as his blankets, away, swinging his legs down. He was only in his black underrobes, but as Lan SiZhui looked around for his outer robes, he couldn’t see them anywhere. Most likely that’s all Wen Ning had left. Lan SiZhui helped him stand, then Wen Qing pulled one of the clothes around his shoulder and tied it off at his neck, mocking a cloak. She pressed her lips together and patted his chest before turning towards the door.

“We will collect A-Yuan and Granny next, then gather everyone.” She paused. “How did you plan on leaving?”

“I have seen a stable somewhere around the watchtower.” Lan SiZhui said. “If there are horses, we could take those. There are also carts to those who are weak and cannot ride well.”

“What about the guards?” Wen Qing asked, raising her chin. Lan SiZhui didn’t answer.

“Gather everyone.” He said courtly, then exited the house before she could, in order to avoid her gaze and disapproving words.

Many people disliked his demonic cultivation, Lan SiZhui himself not an exception. But the truth of the matter was, it was a powerful weapon and a good substitute to his spiritual energy. And it wasn’t like Lan SiZhui had any other choice. He was without his spiritual powers. The only other cultivators here were Wen Ning and Wen Qing. Wen Ning’s cultivation was low. Wen Qing’s talents laid elsewhere, not in combat. Lan SiZhui would not be able to sneak them out without anyone noticing. He knew he had to fight the Jin. This was one of the reasons he didn’t want Jin Ling, Lan JingYi or Wei WuXian with him. If he didn’t have to hold back...

“Lan SiZhui.” He heard from behind himself a few minutes later. He turned and saw most Wen huddling close to each other, watching him curiously, with apprehension and some with contempt. Wen Qing stood in the center, holding Wen Ning by his shoulders. Next to them Granny stood with a bundle of cloths closely cuddled to her chest and Lan SiZhui’s heart skipped a beat. *A-Yuan*.

“When I begin, you all need to stay together.” He said. “Do not be afraid. What I’m doing will not hurt you, but I can’t concentrate on so many things, so if you run off, I might not be able to protect you.”

“What are you going to do?” A young man Lan SiZhui thought he recognized from the village asked, eyes wide. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath.

“Get us out of here.” He sat on a rock protruding from the ground, folding his legs. With a sweep of his hand he called forth Hudie, the instrument awe-inspiring in its dark beauty. The rain quickly saturated the red and white tassels hanging from the tuning pegs. However the strings were coated in glue that repelled the water, not letting the silk strings dampen. It would swell with time and ruin the strings, but for the time Lan SiZhui needed it to hold, it would.

Lan SiZhui closed his eyes, positioning his fingers on his guqin. He recalled the notes he’d written in the Burial Mounds like they’ve always been part of his education, like he’d always known them. He began playing, the soft sounds leaving the guqin gently. Lan SiZhui concentrated on the feeling of swirling energy around him. Even without his spiritual powers he could sense the shift in his surroundings.

He kept his eyes closed but from the gasps around him, he suspected what he already felt – the cold, dreading feeling of resentful energy rising around them. Lan SiZhui played two different commands simultaneously – ordering the resentful energy to rise and to keep away from the group of people behind him.

Lan SiZhui opened his eyes when he sensed the Yin Iron’s energies activate, and indeed, the half of the Stygian Tiger Amulet spun lazily above Hudie’s strings. He watched as black smoke rolled around him, drawing closer then shying away, depending on which command Lan SiZhui played. He took a deep breath and changed the scores. Cold pin-prickles ran up his legs as the resentful energy touched him, but he ignored it as he directed it to act.

He felt the resentful energy move, followed its path in his mind towards the guards. He heard the distant, startled shouts of the Jin, though through the thick curtain of rain it was hard to hear anything else other than the sounds in his head, the resentful energy whispering into his ear and the constant sound like small stones falling over and over, the rain dropping into full puddles and hard roofs.

The guards’ struggle didn’t reach them, but Lan SiZhui could sense it. How they were frightened, how their own resentment rose to the surface in the face of Lan SiZhui’s call. Lan SiZhui felt all that power. He controlled it. He instructed the dark energies to attack. He didn’t want to kill the Jin. He was not bloodthirsty, nor stupid. He knew if he did so, his situation would be even worse.

The resentful energy surrounded the guards, entering their bodies, fusing with their own resentment, intensifying it. Their own insecurities came forth and the guards quieted as they listened to the sounds. However, resentful energy damaged the body as well as mind, this was well-known. Soon their brains couldn’t handle the negative energy any longer and they collapsed, their drawn weapons falling into the mud as their bodies hit the ground.

As soon as their deed was done, the resentful energy withdrew, searching for new victims. It found other guards and slowly but surely the whole compound was left with no Jin guards awake. Lan SiZhui had the urge to do more, to kill or to find other victims. However, rationally he knew this was only the Yin Iron’s toxic aura that made him feel this way, so he

braced himself, mentally pulling walls between himself and the resentful energy. He changed his play once more, calming the violent energies surrounding them. Slowly, oh so slowly the energy dissipated, settled and cleansed. The Stygian Tiger Amulet's half dissolved as well, returning to its dormant state in Hudie's energies.

Lan SiZhui waited for a moment longer, then he smoothed a hand down the strings before he sighed and relaxed his shoulders. He bagged Hudie and turned to the Wen with caution. They looked back similarly alarmed.

"We are safe to go. The stables are that way." Lan SiZhui gestured towards the watchtower. Wen Qing watched him, eyes wide. She swallowed, then turned to her family.

"You've heard!" She said, her voice breaking, betraying the strong emotions within herself. She cleared her throat. "Get a horse and get out of here."

"Where could we go?" A person in the back asked. Lan SiZhui turned to them.

"I have a place in mind. However, you may try your luck individually. I will not force anyone to come with me. If you still want to, I can take you somewhere where we could be safe." Lan SiZhui told them. At this, several people whispered amongst themselves, then one suddenly shot out from the crowd, heading towards the stables in a sprint. Lan SiZhui watched, confused. "Is he alright?" He asked nobody in particular.

"He is scared you will kill him as well." A woman said challengingly. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"I didn't kill anyone." He stated.

"You didn't?" Someone else asked. Lan SiZhui looked over and shook his head, his brows furrowed.

"Mn. I wouldn't. They were just following orders." Lan SiZhui said.

"Then, can we leave without you?" Another asked. Lan SiZhui was about to answer, but Wen Qing took over, barking over her shoulder:

"He just said that you could, didn't he?! Go then, on your way. If more of you go in the same direction, more of you can ride one horse. There are elderly here who will need the mount." She took Wen Ning and headed towards the stables as well. Lan SiZhui waited until a few people followed then he also headed in the direction.

They were fearful but also eager to get out of there.

Night had fallen, Lan SiZhui suspected, for the darkness grew stifling. Lan SiZhui wondered where Jin Ling and Lan JingYi were. Surely by now they've figured out Lan SiZhui's plan. Lan SiZhui glanced at the sky. By now the storm had not calmed, more so, now the lightnings were constant and loud thunders shook the ground. Lan SiZhui hoped none of his friends decided to travel via sword in such weather.

He watched as people mounted horses, some taking off right away in a direction. Lan SiZhui didn't think they knew where they were going. It was fine. He hoped they would find peace

eventually and were not running into danger.

“SiZhui!” Wen Qing called out and Lan SiZhui turned to look at her. She was sitting atop a horse behind Wen Ning, who was holding the reins not just for his horse but for another as well. Lan SiZhui appreciated their thoughtfulness and mounted the horse. By now everyone was seated. They took one cart with them, where several older people and almost still-children sat.

Lan SiZhui looked over them. They were the ones who would come with Lan SiZhui. About twenty of them. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, looking over at Wen Qing. She was looking at him with wide eyes. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath, then turned and urged his horse into motion.

Soon they were galloping over the muddy terrain of Qiongqi Path. Lan SiZhui ignored the unconscious guards laying in the rainwater. He looked straight ahead, heading towards YiLing.

They rode like this for a few minutes until they approached the road leading towards YiLing. However, in the middle of the path stood a white horse, with a person in golden robes atop. Lan SiZhui’s heart pounded in his chest as he approached the lone figure.

As they drew closer, he practically felt the anxiety rolling off the Wen behind his back. Two horses turned and headed in another direction. Lan SiZhui looked over but let them. Behind him Wen Ning stopped his horse several steps behind as Lan SiZhui rode up to the rider. He stopped his horse just before reaching the other.

“Where are the others?” He asked, having to raise his voice to be heard over the rain.

“Lan JingYi went back to Lanling. Wei WuXian is holding up Lan WangJi.” Jin Ling said with a frown.

“Lan JingYi flew in this weather?” Lan SiZhui glanced up. His hood slipped off his head but he didn’t fix it. Jin Ling shook his head, his expression grim.

“Of course not, I didn’t let him. Told him to ride.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Jin Ling looked over Lan SiZhui’s shoulder.

“Is that all?”

“The others left.” Lan SiZhui shrugged. Jin Ling huffed and nodded. He reached up and wiped at his brows, stopping rain from getting into his eyes. With this action he smudged his vermilion mark slightly.

“If I go with you, I can help protect them. But if I stay, I might be able to help Lan JingYi convince the Sect Leaders not to execute you.” He said, looking over the Wen, frowning.

Lan SiZhui was caught off guard by this. In the past, whenever Lan SiZhui had a plan to go off on his own to help someone, Jin Ling would always come up with some way to help, even if it was impossible for him to do so. He would keep insisting he go with them until Lan

JingYi and Lan SiZhui explained for the nth time why Jin Ling would need to execute a different plan. Then he'd reluctantly agree and stalk off. This offer to not involve himself in this one spoke volumes about his dislike towards the Wen still.

"Stay then." Lan SiZhui said, nodding in understanding. "I can take care of them." Jin Ling looked over at him sharply.

"How could you?! You're injured. What are you going to do?! Cleanse the Burial Mounds?!"

"It's our best chance." Lan SiZhui reasoned with a shrug. Jin Ling shook his head.

"If you'd have only waited a little, we could've come up with something. But no, ChunYu-Jun had to save the innocent. Had to play the hero, as always." Jin Ling's gaze was disapproving and hurt. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and bowed his head. He didn't know how to console Jin Ling.

"Jin Ling—" He began but was cut off.

"No. I knew you would do this. When you said we were going to Lanling I just knew you were lying, but I didn't want to accuse you. It is on me, really."

"It's not." Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"It doesn't matter." Jin Ling glared. "You've made your decision, so now we have to figure out how to fix it. Lan JingYi went back to talk to Lan XiChen and Wei WuXian is most likely convincing Lan WangJi as we speak, so perhaps I should also go and see who I can convince. Not a lot of people, but I can at least try." He shrugged, pulling on his horse's reins so the animal turned. "You're going to the Burial Mounds?"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded. Jin Ling returned it, his gaze faraway, deep in thought.

"We'll contact you when we have news. Do not disappear again." Jin Ling's eyes flashed to him. Lan SiZhui nodded.

"I promise." Jin Ling scoffed at that.

"I've heard that before." He tugged on the reins. "Gya!" He lightly kicked his horse and it jumped a little before beginning its gallop through the woods. Lan SiZhui watched him go for a minute, then turned, looking back at the Wen.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning were watching him with a worried look. At his attention, Wen Qing schooled her features into a blank mask. Lan SiZhui felt the urge to smile at them reassuringly, but truthfully, he wasn't feeling too reassured himself. Instead, he inclined his head and directed his horse forward to continue their way towards YiLing.



Lan SiZhui, just like all the Wen, was exhausted after the all-night long ride. They didn't stop to sleep, though some Wen took turns in the cart to rest. Lan SiZhui didn't take that

opportunity. He felt like he couldn't rest until he got the Wen into safety. Wen Qing tried to get him to sleep once, but Lan SiZhui refused.

"You need to rest or else you'll be useless to us. You don't have your spiritual powers anymore, so don't pretend you're not tired." She told him strictly. Lan SiZhui repressed a frustrated sigh.

"I'm fine. I don't need to rest for now."

"SiZhui." Wen Qing glared at him, holding A-Yuan close to her chest.

She convinced Wen Ning to sleep a bit, so now her brother was taking a rest in the cart next to Granny, while Wen Qing took care of the baby. Lan SiZhui have been unsure if he should avoid the child or fuss about his condition. In the end he decided not to poke his nose into it unless it was relevant. He now looked over, his gaze shifting to the toddler in Wen Qing's arms. He was young, younger than Lan SiZhui suspected he had been in the past when he was taken into the Burial Mounds. A-Yuan was playing with the mane of the horse in front of him, taking handfuls, attempting to put them into his mouth, but Wen Qing felt him shift and caught his hand in time, every time.

"I know I can't protect you if I'm too tired to even hold my guqin." Lan SiZhui said. "That is why if I feel like I'm too tired, I'll sleep. For now, I don't need it."

Wen Qing huffed, annoyed, then caught another fistful of horsehair, pulling A-Yuan's hand away from the horse. A-Yuan made a distressed sound. Lan SiZhui frowned.

"Isn't he hungry?"

"Probably." Wen Qing said. "Our rations in the camp included some food that was good for him, but he hasn't eaten since we departed. Nor did any of us, actually." She added with a frown.

"Shouldn't he be... crying?" Lan SiZhui asked, still looking at A-Yuan. Wen Qing huffed.

"You didn't pay attention earlier, when he cried so loud I had to take him away from the cart or else he would've woken everyone? He seems to calm around horses though. He is certainly enjoying the ride." She paused. "At least one of us does. I've been in this saddle for hours now." Lan SiZhui sighed.

"We're almost at YiLing." He looked up at the lightening sky. Since it was nearing winter, days became shorter and the sun rose later. "I'd say about an hour more."

"You still haven't told us where we're going." Lan SiZhui looked over. Truthfully, he didn't say because he was a little scared of her reaction. Still, she deserved to know. If anyone didn't wish to come, they could split in YiLing, so they could try their own luck.

"The YiLing Burial Mounds." Lan SiZhui all but blurted out. Wen Qing watched him for a moment with a strange expression, then her eyes widened.

"What?"

“That is the only place I know of where only me and my friends have been able to get into.” Lan SiZhui said. “If the Jin decided to come after us, they would not be able to enter.”

“The YiLing Burial Mounds is a cursed place. Hundreds of cultivators have tried to cleanse it of resentful energy before, but none succeed, so they’ve decided to ward it off, so nobody would even attempt getting inside.”

Lan SiZhui paused, then said: “I’ve been there for almost three months.”

“Yes.” Wen Qing stared at him. “And even though I’ve seen you only some time after you got out, you were still thin and pale. And that was with your Golden Core still working, even in its weakened state. Do you expect civilians, young and old to survive there?!” By the end, her voice rose and some people behind them stirred.

Lan SiZhui glanced over his shoulder, then guided his horse to go a little faster for privacy’s sake. Wen Qing understood his intention, though she didn’t seem pleased about this, handing A-Yuan to one of the men. A-Yuan yawned even despite all the justling. He must truly enjoy riding the horse. As soon as the child was secured, Wen Qing rode ahead so she could fall in step with Lan SiZhui. He didn’t wait for her to speak when she arrived by his side.

“It’s not so desolate. I can attempt to cleanse it, or at least ward off the resentful energy from where we’re going to live. I’m familiar with the talisman needed. And crops... Crops can be planted in any type of soil, as long as it’s properly looked after.”

“You suddenly know a lot about agriculture.” Wen Qing kept glaring at him. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“When I was little, I lived in a similar place, a graveyard, really. We could also grow crops. Not easily, but radish and some other plants survived.” He paused. “I still have some money from my parting with the Lan Sect. If we sell the horses and add it to that money, we will have enough to buy some basic necessities. Food, some clothing for the winter. Seeds for the spring.”

“So, you really aren’t taking us there without any ideas how to live there.” Wen Qing observed. Lan SiZhui shrugged again, unsure how to answer.

“We should also keep one horse to use it for heavy lifting. We should buy some herbs that could be used for several types of basic medicines, should the need arise. Also, some tools. The Burial Mounds is not fruitful in anything else but there are plenty dead trees around. If we put in some work, we could build houses.”

“Fine.” Wen Qing huffed. “Since it seems like you’re serious about this plan, I’ll indulge you.” She paused. “Granny can sew. It would be cheaper to buy some fabric and she can make simple robes from that. As for the seeds, Wen Zhen is a farmer, he could be able to tell what would be good, if you give him some idea about what kind of soil is in that cursed place. I can take care of the herbs. I know what to buy to be efficient and cheap. Wen Han used to be a carpenter, he can choose the tools and plan how to build the houses.”

Lan SiZhui repressed a smile. Their situation was nothing to smile about, but Lan SiZhui still felt lucky that he had Wen Qing's support in this matter.

"Thank you." He said seriously instead. "I know I'm not much help in such matters, so I appreciate your guidance."

"This is my family we're talking about, Lan SiZhui." She answered grimly. "I'm not doing you a favor. I'm looking out for them as I always have." With this, she turned her horse around and went back to ride beside the cart. Lan SiZhui looked back to see her greet Wen Ning, who was just stirring in the cart. Lan SiZhui sighed, turning back to the road ahead of them. They were near YiLing, but still had a long way to go.



YiLing was strange to return to. Lan SiZhui didn't know how to feel about the place. It was once home, then just a place, then somewhere he felt safe then somewhere he didn't. It certainly held many memories. Lan SiZhui tried to ignore them as they entered, but the sight of the streets brought them back.

This was where him, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi began to search for the Yin Iron outside the Cloud Recesses. Back then they thought they would be able to change history as it was. But they were just small ants in this vast world. They had been here for two weeks. They met Xiao XingChen here. Lan SiZhui thought of him and wondered where he was. If he was alright.

This was also where they fled with Madam Yu after the Wen attacked Lotus Pier. Lan SiZhui remembered how angry Madam Yu had been. Lan SiZhui was half convinced she would leave with Jiang FengMian as soon as they met, but it turned out they were able to convince her to go to Wen Qing. That ended in them getting Wen Qing and Wen Ning into trouble. Lan SiZhui wondered if the supervisory office was still here, but he doubted it. When they visited YiLing with the Ghost General, they didn't visit the office, but Wen Ning told him the place had been burned down a long time ago. Lan SiZhui thought it might've happened during the war, which made enough sense.

There was another memory here. It was hazy and in pieces, just flashes, really, from his childhood. Lan SiZhui was very young. He remembered he got his straw butterfly here, the one he had been taking care of as a treasure – his only physical memory of these times. As he looked over at a spot in front of the town's temple just off the marketplace, he had the sense that was a very familiar spot, and he had spent a long time sitting there. He thought the Ghost General might've been with him at the time. He also recognized the interior of an inn on the main square of the town, the memory strongly connected to the one with his straw butterfly.

However, the sight of the marketplace brought other memories forth as well. The fear and anxiety he felt when he was trying to get to the docks, escaping from Wen Chao. Unfortunately, he got caught then thrown into the Burial Mounds. Lan SiZhui still remembered how afraid he was then. How his heart hammered in his chest, facing Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu on his own for the first time. A memory of that moment surfaced.



When Wen Chao first caught him, he ordered Wen ZhuLiu to attack him. Wen ZhuLiu stepped forward, but hesitated. Then Lan SiZhui pulled his sword. There was a moment then, when Wen ZhuLiu looked at him strangely, questioningly, before he engaged with Lan SiZhui in battle. This must've been the moment Wen ZhuLiu realized that despite his earlier move, Lan SiZhui still had his spiritual powers. This was his first hint that Lan SiZhui's Core couldn't be crushed.

Lan SiZhui wondered why that was. But once again, his timing was not good. He couldn't afford to satisfy any kind of academic curiosity. He needed to get the Wen to safety before he could even think of thinking about this. So, Lan SiZhui talked to the people Wen Qing suggested earlier. Another person, Zhang Ming had revealed he'd been a merchant in the past and took upon himself to sell the horses, hopefully for a good price.

While the others ran their errands, the remaining Wen were left to stand around the cart with the one horse they would keep. Lan SiZhui figured they looked like a group of beggars. It didn't matter. They were, after all, a group of beggars, no, a group of criminals. They were lucky news of the Wen's escape didn't reach this far yet and they were able to prepare before YiLing's people grew apprehensive towards them. He wondered whether Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were already back at Lanling and if they were, what were they trying to convince the Sect Leaders about the Wen's innocence.

These errands the Wen ran took a long time, too much for Lan SiZhui to wonder about such things and feel more and more depressed. However, there was nothing else to do than look out for danger, which he suspected would not come for a little while yet. In the meantime, he felt his eyelids grow heavy in the face of the boring task.

"Young Master..." Someone spoke to his side and Lan SiZhui blinked the tiredness away, turning to them. It was Tao Jun, the young man Lan SiZhui got introduced to in the village as a person who regularly took mail to and from the Wen village. With Lan SiZhui's attention on him, he smiled, bowing. "Young Master, you look exhausted. Some people who went out for supplies said it could take a while. Why don't you rest for a little bit? We will definitely wake you if they return or if we've in danger."

Lan SiZhui hesitated. He promised to protect the remnants. But he also promised Wen Qing that he would rest if he felt too tired. He'd need all his concentration in the Burial Mounds to keep the resentful energy away from them while they crossed the place, then later to attempt cleansing it a little.

His hesitation lasted for a minute only, then he nodded. "Alright. I'll take a nap. Tao Jun, please wake me immediately if anything happens, no matter how insignificant. Even if just an aggressive dog approaches."

"Mn." Tao Jun nodded with a warm smile. "I will, Young Master. I promise."

"Thank you." Lan SiZhui smiled at him tiredly, then went around the cart. It was strange to climb inside, and he thought he might've stepped on someone's foot in his clumsiness. However, they didn't complain, only helped him further. Finally, Lan SiZhui settled next to Wen Ning, who beamed at him.

“Lan SiZhui, don’t worry, just rest! We will look out for danger for you.”

“Thank you, Wen Ning.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him warmly. It didn’t take more than a minute for him to fall asleep.

## Ambivalence II.

“Young Master Lan?” Someone shook Lan SiZhui gently and he blinked his tired eyes awake, feeling like he hadn’t slept a blink. The sun overhead changed its position from when Lan SiZhui fell asleep, so he knew that was not true. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Everyone was there, standing and sitting around, talking or just staring at nothing.

“Everyone is here?” Lan SiZhui asked Tao Jun, who’d shaken him awake. He nodded and Lan SiZhui sighed, pushing himself up. Wen Qing was talking to Wen Ning at the end of the cart. When she saw Lan SiZhui move, she stopped talking and turned to him.

“Tao Jun should’ve let you sleep.” She said disapprovingly, throwing a look at Tao Jun. The man seemed embarrassed. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together as he climbed off the cart.

“It’s fine.” Lan SiZhui said, noting the new bags and boxes on the cart at the feet of people. “Did you get everything?”

“Mostly.” Wen Qing nodded. “We have everything we could get.”

“Good.” Lan SiZhui nodded, rubbing at his eyes. “Then we should go.”

“Mn.” Wen Qing hummed without emotion, watching him. Lan SiZhui sent her a small, tense smile, then turned to the other Wen.

“Is everyone ready to move?”

“Yes, Young Master.” They echoed. Lan SiZhui nodded, satisfied with their response. They all gathered, people getting on the cart that had been attached to their remaining horse. Lan SiZhui patted the animal’s neck. It wasn’t fair to it to bring it to the Burial Mounds, but the Wen would need it. They could take it down to the forest surrounding the Burial Mounds to feed it and if they had no longer needed it, they could sell it so it would have a better life somewhere else.

They headed out of town, walking through the busy streets of YiLing. The people there sent them glances, but nobody seemed openly hostile or unkind. Lan SiZhui ignored them in favor of remembering the route towards the Burial Mounds. They hiked up the hill together, the Wen significantly slower than Lan SiZhui would’ve been on his own, but he didn’t mind. He stopped when he saw familiar surroundings.

In his time the YiLing Patriarch had cleansed the Burial Mounds so effectively, there was no need for a barrier. The ancient wards had been taken down and in their place was a newer, weaker barrier. When Lan SiZhui had first been there, masked men had taken them there. They didn’t need to use any talismans to get inside, and then later they needn’t to use any to get outside. Now, however, the barrier still stood and Lan SiZhui had to open it so the Wen could get through.

He still remembered the charm he used to get out of there, so he used it now. Even without his spiritual powers it worked, and Lan SiZhui pulled out his guqin to keep the resentful energy away from the Wen as they entered. Wen Qing must've understood what he was doing. She looked at him, then back at her people.

“Go on, move quickly. Three people at the time. Don't rush forward too much and stay close!”

“Yes!” The Wen echoed. Some ducked as they got inside, others just stared around in awe as the resentful energy shied away from their bodies, swirling thickly around them. Wen Qing was the last one to enter from the Wen, then Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and also entered.

It was a heady feeling. The resentful energy felt like it recognized Lan SiZhui, welcoming him back. Black smoke curled around his legs, and pained, cruel whispers moaned into his ears. Cold pinpricks run up his legs and Lan SiZhui stared. He played his song slowly and almost in a trance as he watched the resentful energy pulling back from him. His gaze was locked on the sight, feeling powerful and fierce.

He was controlling all that energy. All that darkness obeyed him, bent to his will. He could do anything. If he wanted, he could burn the world down to ashes. If he wanted, he could kill all the Jin and nobody would be wiser.

“SiZhui?” He heard and looked up, finding Wen Qing looking at him from beside Wen Ning. Lan SiZhui blinked at her. She was looking at him with a dark expression, as if she understood the temptation Lan SiZhui faced just now. Lan SiZhui hoped she didn't. He shook his head and urged his song, getting the resentful energy that had been closing in on them farther away. He closed his mind to the whispers and taunts, concentrating on the Wen. He realized they were waiting for him, standing in neat rows on the dirt path leader deeper into the cursed place.

“Ah, I'll lead on.” He said, pushing through the line of Wen to the front. He glanced back, making sure they were following him properly, he headed up the mountain.

This was where he'd headed up not all that long ago, before Lotus Pier, before Guanyin temple. Lan SiZhui and his friends had been getting clues that monsters roamed the area, so naturally, the eager juniors came to night hunt, only to be captured by men in mysterious masks. They were brought into Demon-Subdue Cave, then not long after, they were freed. Then Wei WuXian and Lan Wangji revealed who the masked man was and then Wei WuXian had to sacrifice himself to get them away from fierce corpses. Lan SiZhui still remembered the worry that set deep into his chest as they waited at the foot of the hill for Hanguang-Jun to arrive with Senior Wei, only for them to come back, Hanguang-Jun and Wen Ning dragging Wei WuXian, who was barely alive.

Lan SiZhui was so scared back then. He never passed any judgement over the YiLing Patriarch, but getting to know Senior Wei, he got confirmation that he did better not blindly believing the rumors. Wei WuXian was not so bad after all. Lan SiZhui felt safe with him, like he never had to worry about anything, because Wei WuXian would protect him – and he did, when he took the Wen to the Burial Mounds, just as Lan SiZhui did now.

He wondered if Senior Wei would be proud of his actions, or if they would anger him. Most likely the latter, Lan SiZhui supposed.

The Wen walked slowly and cautiously, but it didn't bother Lan SiZhui. He looked out for threats when they needed to take a break. His fingers ached from playing the same tunes again and again, but he didn't complain, just pressed his lips together and kept on playing. The strings were soft, the rain having softened the glue that held the silk threads together. Lan SiZhui already heard that the instrument sounded duller, and he hoped it would hold up until they reached the cave.

Lan SiZhui was tired, but he still had to cleanse the Burial Mounds, or put up some kind of barrier. He needed to figure out how to shelter the Wen from the resentful energy. When he figured they would come here, he didn't calculate with the overwhelming amount of energy. He figured he would be able to cleanse it, but being here he realized how much his memory cheated him.

Wei WuXian was the Grandmaster of demonic cultivation. Lan SiZhui thought that only meant he was the only one who had ever delved so deeply into this to know his art so intimately. But Lan SiZhui had to realize, not for the first time now, that that was not quite true.

Wen RuoHan had told Lan SiZhui that Xue ChongHai had been the inventor of demonic cultivation. Lan SiZhui learned this in the Burial Mounds the first time he'd been here with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi as well. Then there was Wen RuoHan, who also practiced the art. Wei WuXian was not ultimately unique in his powers. He was not the inventor of this art, even if, perhaps, he was the one to make more common uses for it other than mindlessly killing people as Xue ChongHai and Wen RuoHan had done.

But to cleanse the Burial Mounds, this overwhelming amount of resentful energy, took not only skill, but also great power and vast knowledge. Lan SiZhui was, once again, impressed by what Wei WuXian had been able to accomplish. The YiLing Patriarch was truly impressive.

It was not long before they reached Demon-Subdue Cave. Lan SiZhui led the Wen inside and instructed them to stay there until he told them they could come out. After they were gone, Lan SiZhui faced the mouth of the cave, calculating.

There were countless resentful ghosts in this place. Lan SiZhui knew this. He'd lived here in the past and also recently, for months. He should've known how overwhelming this task was going to seem. It seemed impossible, actually.

Still, this was a task that had to be done, no questions about it. Lan SiZhui couldn't have the Wen live in a small cave together, even if they could live with this situation, he didn't want them to have to endure worse than they had under the YiLing Patriarch's protection. So, he had to do this. If only he knew how.

*Cleansing* was one of the Lan Sect's strongest musical cultivations. It was a song every Lan disciple had to know, regardless if they were practicing musical cultivation or not. Thinking of this, something came to Lan SiZhui's mind and he paused, furrowing his brows.

That was right. Every Lan disciple knew the song, but because they've learned it for a long time, since they were young. It was not an easy song to play, but it was essential. It was also very typically a Lan technique. Few knew the song outside the Sect. The Lan were not selfish people and most of their techniques were public knowledge. However, a few were hard to find, since they proved so hard to learn, most people didn't bother – because of this, they did not have a good market.

And so, the question rose – how did Wei WuXian know the song so well that only after short years of being Lan WangJi's good friend, he could use it so effectively that he could cleanse the entire Burial Mounds? The answer was quite simple: Wei WuXian didn't.

Wei WuXian was the Grandmaster of demonic cultivation, but he was also a Jiang disciple, not a Lan. His musical cultivation differed vastly from theirs. Lan SiZhui rarely heard him play his flute in the future, and so he wasn't sure, but he thought what Wei WuXian played sounded more like the ancient Qin language than the modern Lan musical cultivation.

Lan SiZhui's theory was as follows: everyone who had ever attempted to study the Qin language learned of its birth first. How people believed music had an effect on souls – dead and alive alike. The people who refined this effect into a language, the Qin language, they had to go through the long and painful process Lan SiZhui had to as well: experiment on the subjects to see how they reacted to different sounds.

Wei WuXian's musical cultivation was not as melodic as the Lan's, but despite its ear-splitting sound, there was structure to it – not the most strategic and it sounded horrible, but it had the effect he desired from the resentful energy. This meant that Wei WuXian most likely did the same thing the ancestors of the Lan had done and experimented with different sounds until he could affect the resentful energy how he wanted it to.

Lan SiZhui had done the same thing, but he had something to build from; the old Qin language was his crutch, and he built his vocabulary to the resentful energy from that. However, by this logic, the YiLing Patriarch didn't only not have the same musical education as Lan SiZhui, he also didn't have the knowledge that this kind of play could affect the ghosts. The YiLing Patriarch had invented his own Qin language, specified to resentful energy and resentful ghosts.

Lan SiZhui longed to ask his former adoptive father about this, to know more. What kind of scores did he play? Was he so familiar with the sounds that he could create new orders on the spot, or did he have to experiment first? How long did it take him to develop this technique? How many trials and errors? How effective was it? Did it only work on resentful energy or on regular ghosts as well?

However, the YiLing Patriarch wasn't here now. He was somewhere in the distant future. Lan SiZhui couldn't ask him questions. He couldn't ask him for advice. All he could do was to draw strength from his courage and figure this out himself.

Lan SiZhui sat on the ground with a huff, still lazily plucking the strings to keep the worst of the resentful energy away. He hardly noticed that the black smoke caressed him gently, as if petting him.

So, *Cleansing* was not the answer as to how to cleanse the Burial Mounds. Wei WuXian didn't know the song and even if he did, Lan SiZhui suspected it was too weak for this job anyways. He needed something else to do this, but in reality, Lan SiZhui had a hard time disassociating from his studies. He was taught that if he wanted to rid of resentful energy, he needed to cleanse it. What else could be done to get it away?

Lan SiZhui sat with his eyes closed, thinking hard on his problem. He was playing a song which told the resentful energy to stay away from him. He supposed he could give the order to stay away from him and the Wen permanently, but he hardly thought the dark energies would listen to him. He could draw it into himself, but even a portion of the resentful energy in the Burial Mounds would kill him. This definitely wasn't the answer. Lan SiZhui shuddered at the mental image of thick, black smoke invading his body, filling him with so much resentment, his brain would literally melt.

Could he somehow satisfy the resentful energy? Probably not. Even if he directed it at something he didn't mind killing – and there was hardly such a thing – the resentful energy wouldn't be satisfied. More so, it would've tasted what killing felt like and would've wanted more. Lan SiZhui knew this feeling, the feeling he got every time he fought with his guqin – only he was strong enough to ignore and shut the voices out.

Would freeing the resentment help? Wei WuXian, after all, had taken down the main barrier and put his own in its place. Maybe that was the answer, maybe that's how the Burial Mounds had been cleansed in the past. Without knowing the facts, however, Lan SiZhui was confident that wasn't the case. Wei WuXian had lived here before he came here with the Wen. Lan SiZhui's methods were gentle compared to Wei WuXian's demonic cultivation, and so it was not far fetched to think in order to get out, Wei WuXian took down the entire barrier.

Lan SiZhui looked down at the ground. It was possible, though hardly believable that Wei WuXian dug up all the corpses and gave them a proper burial. That was crazy. Lan SiZhui looked up at the sky, heavy with rainclouds. It always was, in this cursed place. Could he somehow... bless the rain so it cleansed the Burial Mounds?

Lan SiZhui sighed. He was tired. His ideas were turning ridiculous. Exhausted like this, he was no use. He would never figure out how to get rid of the resentful energy if he was too tired to—That was it! Lan SiZhui almost jumped up in excitement. Of course! Nobody was so strong as to cleanse the whole place. The YiLing Patriarch might've been the Grandmaster of demonic cultivation, but he was also not an immortal to wield such strength.

Lan SiZhui grinned, looking around. He didn't know why he expected anyone to be near him who would share his excitement at his realization. It was probably for the best. He didn't exactly know how to explain this.

He ducked his head, pressing his lips together, looking at Hudie. Now, he just had to figure out how to *do* this.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

Failure after failure should've made Lan SiZhui discouraged. However, he tried his hardest to stay strong-minded and not give up. He had been trying to turn his plan into action for a long time now. His earlier discovery had made him too excited, forgetting about his tiredness for a little while before it came back full-force some time later. Not wanting to risk injury while he rested, Lan SiZhui bagged his guqin and retired to the tunnel that led to the bedchambers.

He did not go inside. The Wen were inside and they depended on him now. They trusted him so far, trusted him to take them to safety, to protect them from the Sects and other people as well. They offered their help at YiLing, going to sell and buy things, using their knowledge to aid him where he was failing. They cared for him, getting him to rest. The Wen were truly special people.

To have to face their disappointment scared him. They've trusted him and Lan SiZhui wanted to earn that trust. The price was him having to figure out how to make the cursed Burial Mounds into a livable place. Every minute he was not doing that, he felt guilt crawling up his stomach.

Logically, he knew he wasn't responsible for this. He knew that the Wen were in a desperate situation and everything was better to them than the camp. He also knew they had very little choice when it came to living somewhere. He also knew the Wen would not blame him for this, for Lan SiZhui was a sole man and hundreds had tried to cleanse the Burial Mounds before him, people more skilled and with more spiritual power than he ever had.

But logic had very little to do with Lan SiZhui's feelings. So, he slept in the tunnel, away from the Wen huddling together inside. When he woke a few hours later, he was covered with a thin cloth and there was a bowl of food next to him. He sent a silent thanks to Wen Qing, then ate the food as quick as he could. He left both the bowl and the cloth, neatly folded, in the tunnel and ventured out again, pulling out his stash of talismans to protect him while he was working on his problem.

He could not waste this kind of time again. There were both old and young in this cave and it couldn't be comfortable in there. A-Yuan was not even a year old, though the weather had begun to turn into winter, he was too young to be cooped up like this. And Granny was old. There were other elderly amongst the Wen as well, but she was the most fragile from what Lan SiZhui saw, and so he had to get her out of there as well.

He sat at the mouth of the tunnel, where resentful energy was thin enough that it wouldn't harm him too much, but it was still present. This had been his usual spot when he had been in the Burial Mounds after Wen Chao threw him here. This was where he'd experimented with his musical cultivation, creating notes and scores to be able to control it, manipulate it. This was like he never even left, only continued his research from back then. Now, too, he had very little spiritual energy and winter was approaching.

It was hard to imagine a year had passed since then. Him, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling had been in the past for a year and half now, trying to salvage what they could of the past, and yet barely anything had changed. The Wen were wanted once again, but instead of Wei WuXian, it was Lan SiZhui who took them away from their prison to another. He could only hope his story ended differently than his former adoptive father's had.



Lan SiZhui shook off these thoughts and closed his eyes, concentrating on his task. It was dangerous to have his thoughts scatter when he was doing this. He positioned his fingers, collecting himself at last and began to play, using the notes he was familiar with to hopefully reach his goal.

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“I’m tired of this music.” He heard behind him as he played, watching as the resentful energy coiled and jerked, as if in pain. Lan SiZhui almost felt bad for this thoughtless, non-sentient entity in front of him, but he knew it was born from death and destruction, so he didn’t cease his play.

“I’m sure Lan SiZhui is doing something important right now. Is it wise to disturb him?” Another person said, his voice closer.

“A-Ning, I’ve been listening to this for almost two days now.” Wen Qing snapped. There was a shuffle of clothes from behind Lan SiZhui. “Whatever he’s doing, it’s clearly not working.”

“Ah, but don’t you always say some things take patience while others are worth rushing? Who’s to say what he’s doing now is worth rushing?”

“Don’t throw my words back at me. And whatever he’s doing, I’m sure it can wait for a few hours while he sleeps and eats.” With this, footfalls came closer to Lan SiZhui, who, in his distraction, played the wrong note.

Resentful energy lashed out at him, thick black smoke like a limb shooting out of the swirl in front of him, attacking. He was wearing a Graveyard-purging amulet – the last one in his qiankun pouch – which burned quickly, dissipating the resentful energy coming for Lan SiZhui as well. He felt the cold touches of the resentful energy around his shins, but he held back the urge to jump up and retreat to the relative safety of the tunnel behind him.

Instead, he played some different notes, calming the dark energies, almost as an apology, playing a shooting, slow tune. He forced the resentful energy back away from him, from them. Lan SiZhui kept playing softly, even as he spoke.

“Perhaps next time just come and get me?” He posed this as a question, but he couldn’t fully erase the irritation from his voice. There was a huff behind him, that if he didn’t know who it came from, he could’ve thought it sounded almost embarrassed.

“I’m not your servant to ‘come and get you’. I’m here because your play is driving us all crazy. Come inside to eat something and sleep, so we all get a break from your… music.” She hesitated at this last part, as if she wasn’t sure she should be calling it music at all. Lan SiZhui understood; he wasn’t sure about this either. It was mostly just notes randomly thrown together. Still, something about this prompted Lan SiZhui to comment on it.

“I thought demonic cultivation didn’t bother you.”

At this, Wen Qing glared sharply at him, he could tell from the sharp intake of breath. “What makes you say this, Lan SiZhui?! Just because I’ve been forced to be Wen RuoHan’s doctor,

I'm immune to the wretched art of demonic cultivation?!"

Lan SiZhui blinked, eyes wide as he turned to stare up at Wen Qing. She was glaring down at him, angry. Lan SiZhui quickly stood and bowed low in apology.

"My apologies, I didn't mean it that way." In reality, Lan SiZhui wasn't sure what he meant exactly.

He just thought that Wei WuXian and Wen Qing also worked together back when they were stuck in the Burial Mounds. Her brother, Wen Ning, also became a creature of resentful energy, and came to this stage by demonic cultivation, so Lan SiZhui didn't think this really bothered her. Of course, those were different times and different circumstances. Wen Ning was dead and Wen Qing desperate. For Wei WuXian to bring her brother back, she could only feel admiration towards him.

"Sorry." He repeated, quieter than previously. Wen Qing glared at him for a moment, then she took hold of his arm and tugged him deeper into the cave, her gaze scanning the area behind Lan SiZhui. She didn't say anything for a long moment, then turned and dragged Lan SiZhui back into the chamber.

Several Wen looked up as they entered, their expressions curious and earnest. Lan SiZhui bowed his head, not looking any of them in the eye as he was led deeper inside. Wen Qing sat him on the stone bed where Lan SiZhui spent most of his days when he was thrown inside by Wen Chao. Lan SiZhui didn't complain, sitting carefully.

He chanced a look up, seeing most of the Wen had gone back to whatever they'd been doing until now. There was a woman who was weaving something from the hay on the ground. A man was sharpening a piece of wood, blowing on it to get rid of the sawdust before he ran his finger over the area and went back to carving. Several people were huddled in smaller groups, talking amongst themselves. A group had improvised a Weiqi board by drawing it into the dirt and they played with stones that were neither round nor small. Lan SiZhui watched as they spit on the stones before rubbing it into the dirt, creating darker pieces to the opponent's light ones.

There was shuffling, where Wen Qing and Wen Ning were crouched over a woman who was tending to a small fire, stirring something above it in one of the bowls Lan SiZhui found in the cave so long ago. Then Wen Qing straightened and carefully brought a bowl over to Lan SiZhui. He took it with a grateful tilt of his head. It was some kind of vegetable stew, not something Lan SiZhui was familiar with. He suspected this was just something they threw together from the things they had.

"Eat." Wen Qing's command echoed in the chamber. The Wen were quiet. Lan SiZhui bowed his head above the bowl and ate without looking up. The Wen slowly began speaking, first in whispers, then in a normal volume as the atmosphere softened around them. Once Lan SiZhui was done with eating, Wen Qing directed him to lay down. Lan SiZhui made the mistake to protest.

"But—"

“Lan SiZhui, if you do not sleep now, I will use my needles to help you along.” She glared as she pulled three thin, silver needles from her belt. Lan SiZhui gulped, looking up at Wen Qing’s serious face. He sighed and turned to show his back to the Wen. He was asleep before he consciously decided to.

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When Lan SiZhui woke, the Wen were sleeping. All around the chamber, spread out as if camping, they used the other’s leg as pillow and scrap cloths as blankets. A man laid curled against the horse. They kept the animal in the tunnel, but now it was inside, laying down and breathing deeply. Lan SiZhui never saw a horse sleep before. He thought they slept standing up.

The animal’s natural body heat also heated up the chamber as well, so this was probably wise to bring it inside for warmth. Almost everyone was asleep. There were three people in one corner, who were sitting up and talking softly, but they didn’t react to Lan SiZhui’s awareness. Wen Qing and Wen Ning were curled around each other, leaning against one of the walls. Much like how Lan SiZhui found them in the YiLing supervisory office. He stood and stretched, then picked up the cloth someone put on him. He went over and carefully covered the siblings.

Once he was sure everyone was mostly comfortable, he stepped over the bodies and outside. He applied a Graveyard-purging talisman, then went back to his spot to continue his play. He knew this bothered Wen Qing, and if he could do it any other way, perhaps he would, to save her from discomfort. But this was for all of their sake and Lan SiZhui didn’t regret experimenting, as long as he was successful.

So, he sat and positioned his fingers, sighing softly. He needed to succeed. For the Wen’s and his own sake.

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Lan SiZhui took a deep breath. This was it. He opened his eyes and played, the notes of the guqin soft and melodic, almost like a lullaby. It was.

Lan SiZhui figured out earlier why he wouldn’t be able to cleanse the Burial Mounds. Countless cultivators had attempted to do so, and because of this, Lan SiZhui stood no chance. The resentful energy was too thick, too stubborn, too strong to get rid of. The YiLing Patriarch must’ve figured out that much as well, and so he didn’t even attempt to cleanse it. No, he did something completely different.

Since they used musical cultivation, which was the most effective against ghosts and spiritual beings, the Lan Sect’s disciples received their training on how to get rid of them early on. Lan SiZhui had no reference of what age other Sects taught this, but to the Lan, this was required knowledge in the first year of training.

Resentful ghosts needed to be liberated, first. The cultivator would use *Inquiry* to communicate with the ghost to figure out the root of their resentment. If the root was something that the cultivator could accomplish, they’d do so. If it was not, then they would

need to resolve to more aggressive methods, such as suppressing. This would settle the ghost, rid their resentment forcefully, without solving the root of their resentment, using *Cleansing*. If they could not be suppressed, then came the third stage; elimination. The ghost would need to be destroyed. The score for this was lesser-known, since this was not a favored method.

Lan SiZhui's solution fell between the lines. *Cleansing* only worked if the resentful ghost was receptive to it. If it was not, there was no point in even trying to do so, hence the state of the Burial Mounds. However, there was another method. This was not often used and Lan SiZhui didn't think anyone had used it since ancient times, since common practice took place of half-successful methods. But he'd learned about this in his studies.

Lan SiZhui would not attempt *Cleansing*, nor *Elimination*. He would not be successful. But he needn't to cleanse the resentful energy for it to go away and don't bother the people living in the place. He would just need to settle it, force it to stay dormant. He didn't know the cultivational score to this method, since this was not used anymore. With his other scores, he could build on his knowledge about the modern Qin language and create scores to the old Qin language based on that. But in this case he had to figure it out from scratch.

He used his knowledge about *Cleansing* and *Rest*, using the appropriate scores to build his own. There was really no quick way to do this, only through trials and errors. He did his best to speed up the process, but it was not easy.

However, now, after days of trying, he thought he'd finally figured it out.

The resentful energy swirled around in front of him. Lan SiZhui watched as he played slowly, not wanting to push his luck. The ink-like fog slowly became more and more transparent as it disappeared from the air. The hostile energy surrounding Lan SiZhui softened. The voices in his head quieted.

It was a slow process. He couldn't rush this. He had to be patient. It paid off when he noticed the resentful energy getting thinner and thinner, slowly but surely disappearing from the air, and for the first time in this timeline, Lan SiZhui could finally make out the courtyard in front of the cave. He remembered this place from his imprisonment here. From much earlier, he had scattered memories of this place as well. He recognized the dead trees around himself and the dead soil as well. For a long time, nothing would grow. Then, hopefully, they would be able to plant turnips and other vegetables.

Lan SiZhui watched and played, paying close attention to the shift of energies around himself. He didn't stop playing even after it looked like the resentful energy was gone. He knew better. He felt the resentful energy, felt the anger of the land, the underlying will to harm and destroy. He would need to play until it all went away, or else it would just return.

It took a long time. Lan SiZhui didn't even know how long. After a while, he deemed it enough to have done his job thoroughly and softly ceased his play, his fingers sore from so much play, some even bleeding. But it was worth it.

"Wow!"

"Amazing!"

“All that darkness is gone!”

He heard the voices from behind himself. He looked back and up. The Wen were gathered just behind him, as if there was an invisible line there, that they couldn't cross. Wen Qing was the only one who stood almost next to Lan SiZhui, watching the land with wide eyes, her lips parted in wonder. Lan SiZhui bagged his guqin and rose on stiff legs. He wobbled a little, but someone immediately supported him on his other side. Looking over, he saw Wen Ning, looking at him hesitantly, shyly. He smiled at him gratefully.

“SiZhui.” Wen Qing spoke on his other side and he turned to her, eyes wide. He hoped Wen Qing wasn't about to scold him again. However, when he looked, Wen Qing's face was not angry, nor in its usual scowl. She was looking at Lan SiZhui with something akin relief. She then took a step back and bowed. Lan SiZhui immediately moved to catch her, raising her out of her bow. She pressed her lips together, catching his elbows, so they held each other's. “Lan SiZhui. Thank you.”

“There's no need.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “There really isn't. I've promised I'd bring you to a safe place. It was my mistake that I haven't done this sooner.” Wen Qing pressed her lips together, this time in frustration. But then she huffed, looking away, behind herself.

“Alright. Now that we can go outside safely, let us bring stuff outside. Wen Han once we've breathed some fresh air, let us begin planning the building of our new homes.” She said. As they began planning, assigning work and laying out plans, Wen Qing turned to Lan SiZhui, all tenderness gone from her expression. “Now, we've rested in the past four days, but you have not. Go back and sleep. We will have food ready when you wake.”

“I can help—”

“Lan SiZhui.” Wen Qing snapped, glaring at him. She also pulled out three silver needles threateningly. Lan SiZhui huffed.

“After I've rested and ate, can I help?” He asked, sounding like a child. He found it both embarrassing and like he didn't care how he sounded. He was tired. So, so tired. Getting rid of the resentful energy took more out of him than he thought and the world tilted a little as he swayed on his feet.

“We will see.” Wen Qing said, looking him up and down with a frown. She turned to Wen Ning then. “A-Ning, bring him inside and make sure no one disturbs him.”

“It's really not necessary—” Lan SiZhui began. Once again, Wen Qing cut him off with a look and Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes, admitting defeat. Wen Qing exchanged a look with Wen Ning and nodded to him. Wen Ning returned it and took Lan SiZhui by the elbow, guiding him inside the cave. The horse was gone, thankfully, and Lan SiZhui didn't even bother to pretend as he collapsed into the bed, falling asleep without even taking off his boots.



The first few days were strange. Lan SiZhui couldn't quite put his finger on what was odd about it, but it was not pleasant. Awkward and a little lost, he tried to help the Wen, but either them, or Wen Qing rejected his help. He tried to initiate talk with the Wen, but they were polite and seemingly uncomfortable in his presence, so he always ended up saying his goodbyes as soon as polite and left.

Wen Ning brought him food, but the other Wen never approached him, sitting together, eating on their own. Wen Ning often sat with him then, not minding the distance – he said it himself, when Lan SiZhui asked him why he wasn't eating with the others.

The Wen didn't seem to know what to make of him. Even though he lived in Dafan with them for a while and Wen Qing vouched for him, they were still wary of him. Not necessarily fearful, just cautious. Lan SiZhui always felt awkward around them, not because he knew them in the past, but because they didn't. To them he was an outsider, not part of the family.

Lan SiZhui wondered if the Wen felt the same way about Wei WuXian in the YiLing Patriarch's time with them as well, or if he managed to find the common ground. He supposed he had that too. He was also a runaway with them, his status and title notwithstanding. Still, he couldn't fit within the Wen and he didn't know how to fix that.

He had always took it poorly when he had nothing to do. He tried to busy himself by working on his scores of old Qin language. However, this was experimental work and without any resentful energy around him he would not be able to prove any of them actually worked and because of that he soon got bored of it as well. The Wen were busy while he'd been cast to the sidelines. Winter was upon them and the cave was not suitable for twenty people to live in, and they planned on building houses anyways, so the Wen got to it under Wen Han's instructions.

The man was a good leader and a good carpenter. They got wood from nearby and for once, Lan SiZhui was granted a job. Although he had never worked with wood before, neither had many Wen. Wen Han showed him and two other, younger man how to saw the wood and prepare it to use for building. Lan SiZhui was surprised how much work it took.

They worked on this for a long time, sawing and measuring, sawing and measuring. Lan SiZhui enjoyed the work and enjoyed the challenge as well. He liked working with the others as well; they were similarly clueless as he was and so they helped each other out.

Throughout the days they managed to get the ground dug up and some Wen began working on planting the vegetables and fruits they got from the market. Taking the horse with them proved to have been a wise choice. They used the horse to tear trees from the ground and to transfer discarded soil from the fields to the houses, where it was used to even out the ground.

It was hard work and Lan SiZhui found it strangely relaxing. He found escape in the mindless motions of sawing the wood and handing over to others to prepare for building. He was glad that the Wen finally decided to include him in their work. He got to know the men he worked with and even though first they were a little shy and tentative towards him, they warmed up to him soon enough.



Lan SiZhui haven't heard from Lan JingYi and Jin Ling since they've parted at Qiongqi. He wasn't sure what that meant. He wasn't sure if he should be worried or not.

On one hand it was good. Since he hadn't heard from them, it also meant he hadn't heard from the Sects as well. Nobody came to Burial Mounds to demand his head on a platter. Nobody came to seek justice against the Wen. It could mean they were still just trying to convince the Sects – it had been more than a week since they'd arrived. It could mean they have managed to convince the Sects, although in that case Lan SiZhui wasn't sure why they hadn't come.

On the other hand, it was bad. He wasn't sure what Jin Ling's plan was regarding the Sects. He wasn't even sure Jin Ling had a plan. However, if he did, he was sure Jin Ling would come to tell him if there was something wrong or something good happening. Or Lan JingYi.

Not knowing what was going on outside scared Lan SiZhui more than he would admit. He was naturally an anxious person and this squeezed his stomach tight with nerves. He tried to ignore it as time went on, but the longer this dragged on, the more Lan SiZhui was terrified what could've happened.

The Burial Mounds were a secluded place and they didn't really leave it just yet. They would need to, soon, but for now they had everything they needed. When they arrived, they got most things they would need. But this meant that Lan SiZhui couldn't even guess the state of the cultivation world outside.

It wasn't like he had to be so worried or that he needed to know what was happening outside. After all, he trusted Lan JingYi and Jin Ling with his life and even more. Lan SiZhui had no doubt that if anyone, it would be them, paired up with Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue, who would be able to convince the Sect Leaders not to attack.

But it was hard to clench the anxiety and it was hard not to listen to his inner fears. They were constantly in the back of his mind. He just hoped they were truly unnecessary thoughts that he should not worry about and not legitime.



Being in the same time and place as A-Yuan was beyond strange. On a level, Lan SiZhui felt disconnected from the child. He realized A-Yuan was him, but he was also himself. He knew A-Yuan's parents. *His own* parents. He got them killed, as indirectly as it was. This was hard to comprehend in and of itself, but when he thought of the toddler, thoughts began to crowd into his mind and he could hardly make a coherent thought.

A-Yuan was him and yet he wasn't. Not in a way Lan SiZhui thought of himself. Wei WuXian wasn't here now, so A-Yuan might never have him in his life. Even though Lan SiZhui forgot him for a long time, Wei WuXian still had a big effect on his life. Both his adoptive fathers had been righteous and always choose to do the right thing, even if it meant doing bad things. Lan SiZhui knew this all his life. He believed that without them in his life

he would not have grown up to have such values in his life and he feared if A-Yuan also grew up without them, he would be different than Lan SiZhui.

Would that mean Lan SiZhui would be erased from the flow of time in a few years? Or any day now? He wondered.

He also didn't know the rules here. Was he allowed to be near his younger self? He wasn't an expert in time travel – no one was, for the record – but he felt like he was not supposed to interact with A-Yuan. It was not only extremely strange to be near the babe, knowing the tiny creature would be him one day, but in his heart he felt like it was also not supposed to happen. It was one thing to manipulate the past when he wasn't alive, but if he was, then every one of his decisions could affect the baby.

There was also his guilt and questioning of his parents' intentions. Lan SiZhui didn't know them well, but they have discussed some things that in the moment he thought were about a stranger's life. Hao YiFei, for example, didn't want her child to become a cultivator. Both her and Wen XiaoQiang wanted A-Yuan to have this choice, whether he wanted to become a cultivator or not.

Lan SiZhui's situation was straightforward. While he was with Wei WuXian, his former adoptive father often taught him tricks here and there. He'd taught Lan SiZhui some sword moves he'd been using ever since he took up Yingjiu. The Lan teachers often thought this was just a bad habit and Lan SiZhui also believed this, but Lan WangJi didn't mind. He sometimes taught Lan SiZhui himself, showing him moves Lan SiZhui at the time didn't realize were moves of the Jiang Sect. He just thought Lan WangJi had a unique style of fighting and wanted to teach this to Lan SiZhui. It took a long time for him to figure it out, and by the time he did, he didn't care much for why Lan WangJi taught these to him – or rather, he was too old to ask such questions.

Anyhow, Lan SiZhui's path was carved out from the beginning. It was never questioned he would become a cultivator. Even when he lived in the Burial Mounds, he was nudged towards the path of the sword. Then he lost his memories and joined the Lan Sect, where they expected this from him, never questioning whether he wanted to take this path or not. Not like Lan SiZhui was against it. He didn't mind, though he didn't really think he had a choice either.

He wondered; if A-Yuan grew up having a choice, would he also choose cultivation? Or would he become like his parents? Would anyone even mention them to him? Lan SiZhui didn't remember the Wen ever talking to him about his parents. He didn't think about them because he didn't know better. He suspected this made the choice for the Wen and in fear of upsetting him, they just acted as if Lan SiZhui never had parents.

Lan SiZhui was not mad about this decision. He wasn't overly joyed, now that he knew better, he wished the Wen would've told him some of them, would've made him remember his parents so he could honor them instead of just getting on with his life accepting that he was an orphan.

Still, these things were too complicated to find answers to. Lan SiZhui wouldn't know what path A-Yuan took when he got older until it happened. He wouldn't know if telling him about



his parents would make him remember them for longer than Lan SiZhui had. He wouldn't know if Wei WuXian's absence would have a great effect on him or no.

Because of this, Lan SiZhui didn't even try to find answers. This was a situation where he needed to take caution and approach slowly. Because of this, Lan SiZhui mostly ignored A-Yuan's presence. It made him feel bad and hurt on his behalf, but years and years of training was hard to shake off. Lan SiZhui wasn't about to run headfirst into this situation.



The building of the houses took longer than Lan SiZhui expected. They cultivated the soil into something viable before winter and they rushed to plant their vegetables. Nothing would come of them until a year had passed, one of the herbalists had said. Lan SiZhui wasn't happy about this; they would most likely lose some people before they could eat what they've planted. Wen Qing said that was to be expected.

They've lived their days in relative peace. One day was like the other, blending together until Lan SiZhui couldn't tell how much time had passed. He was expecting news from Jin Ling and Lan JingYi at any time, but as the days passed, he began to lose hope that they would contact him. He still didn't know why this was. He could only hope they were not dead.

Time had gone on and soon winter set and they were completely out of food. They didn't dare to go outside the barrier so far but their scarcely stored supplies had been running low for days now. There was no way to postpone going to YiLing to buy some more. They still had money left from when they sold the horses.

Lan SiZhui, naturally, volunteered to go out. He knew if he let any of the Wen go, he would be too anxious. He wouldn't be able to concentrate on any of his hard-earned tasks. Wen Qing advised that one of the traders go, but Lan SiZhui didn't budge, not on this. He stubbornly told Wen Qing he would go with them – how else would they leave the Burial Mounds anyways?

Wen Qing accepted after arguing for a day about this, so the next day Lan SiZhui took the chosen Wen and Wen Ning, who had somehow convinced his sister to also come, down the hill. Even though he settled the resentful energy, fierce corpses were still a threat to look out for, so he kept his guqin close and watched out. The Wen followed him closely and quietly.

It was not yet fully winter but the chill had already set and the mornings brought frost. Even now, during the day Lan SiZhui watched the dead trees in the Burial Mounds as they passed them, taking note of the sparkling sheen of frost on them. There was hardly any sunlight in this cursed place, but even through the thick, grey clouds, they could see it shine through. It was as terrifying and lifeless as cold.

Lan SiZhui could not compare this to the winters of Cloud Recesses, for there the land was always beautiful, well-cared for and even in the cold of winter full of life. Here, winter just brought the feeling of everything being dead out more. Lan SiZhui rarely saw an ugly winter in his life, but here, he had experienced it for the second time.

Soon they've reached the barrier and Lan SiZhui paused. He was going to go outside for the first time in probably weeks, and he didn't know what to expect. Did the people in YiLing already hear about the Wen? Did they know they were runaways, criminals in the eye of the cultivation world? They probably didn't care. He hoped they didn't.

Someone cleared their throat behind him and he looked back, seeing Wen Ning suspiciously looking around as if he wanted to give Lan SiZhui privacy, but wanted to move at the same time. Lan SiZhui understood and chuckled a little before pulling out a charm and applying it to the barrier. They rushed through and just like that, they were outside.

Even though Lan SiZhui settled the resentful energy, there was still a big difference in energies between the inside and the outside. Lan SiZhui felt like he was stepping into the sun after spending so much time in the winter. He felt like he could finally breathe better. The Burial Mounds were as safe as could be right now, but they still had a suppressing aura after decades, if not centuries worth of exposure to resentful energy.

He saw the same relief on Wen Ning and Wen Li. They smiled at him and Lan SiZhui returned it before leading them down the path towards YiLing. Anxiety made him nervous as they approached the town. He didn't remember much of YiLing from his own past, but he remembered about them from the Sunshot Campaign. They had been oppressed by the Wen, berated if not worse if they didn't worship the land these people walked on. If they knew the people coming were of the Wen Sect as well, they would not take well to it.

Fortunately, it seemed Lan SiZhui's fears were for nothing. Wen Li offered to go and trade on his own, and Lan SiZhui and Wen Ning weren't the kind of people to push their will onto others, so even though they wished to go with him, they accepted that he would do better on his own. While Wen Li was buying food for them, Wen Ning and Lan SiZhui looked for horses. They took their own down the mountain to get their food up, but the horse was old, tired and underfed. Someone suggested they try to trade it for one a little younger and stronger to get through the winter.

As expected, most people noticed the reasons why they wanted to trade the horse and laughed at them for wanting to trick them into trading for a better horse. Since they expected this, Lan SiZhui and Wen Ning were not offended and instead, asked for advice to make the horse last longer. Most traders found this surprising and ended up telling them anyways.

They did this for a few hours, then Wen Li found them, saying he secured the foods, now they just needed to take the cart to the vendors so they could pack up. As they circled the market, Lan SiZhui found that Wen Li not only secured them enough food to last for about a month, but he also got variety of food, not just one of a kind. He also had some money left over, so they could purchase more if they ran out.

With a feeling of a job well done, Lan SiZhui, Wen Li and Wen Ning headed back to the Burial Mounds to let the Wen know about the good news. For the first time in months, Lan SiZhui's luck seemed to look up. Only when they arrived back to the settlement, they found it in an uproar. People were gathering in front of the cave's entrance, nobody coming to greet them. Lan SiZhui and Wen Ning exchanged a look, then headed over as well, leaving Wen Li to look after the food they've taken.

Lan SiZhui didn't see anything that would warrant this kind of thing. As they got closer, they heard voices speaking in the center of the crowd, but he couldn't make out the words. Gently, Lan SiZhui pushed through the crowd, the Wen quieting down as he passed them, and soon everyone was looking at him as he passed the last of them to enter the middle of their circle.

For a moment he had hoped it was Jin Ling and Lan JingYi who'd come. He saw white Lan robes and his heart skipped a beat, but then he heard the person apparently arguing with Wen Qing and he knew it wasn't Lan JingYi and Jin Ling who came.

"Lady Wen, I don't mean trouble for Lan SiZhui or the Wen. I came to help, alright?"

"Wei WuXian, we were fine without you here." Wen Qing answered, glaring at the other boy. "Your presence is not going to help, but complicate things instead."

At this, Wei WuXian pouted, crossing his arms over his chest and turning away from her, right towards Lan SiZhui. As soon as Wei WuXian saw him, his face lit up, his pouting forgotten as he beamed at Lan SiZhui. Next to him, Lan WangJi was stone-faced as ever, gazing at him calmly.

"SiZhui!" Wei WuXian exclaimed. "There you are!"

## Ambivalence III.

“Ah, brother Wei, Hanguang-Jun.” Lan SiZhui bowed. Lan WangJi inclined his head in acknowledgement, but Wei WuXian clicked his tongue and stepped closer.

“SiZhui, aren’t we sworn brothers? Don’t be so formal!” He grinned. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together in a tense smile, then stepped forward.

“Brother Wei, why you’re here?” He asked, looking around. “Is anyone else here?” He meant either the Sects’ armies or Jin Ling and Lan JingYi, but Wei WuXian shook his head.

“No! It’s just us two, SiZhui. We came to talk to you. Can we go somewhere more private?” He asked, looking around them at the Wen still standing around them. Lan SiZhui also looked over them, then nodded, turning to Wen Ning.

“Wen Ning, please make sure the food is properly stored and distributed amongst the people.”

“Sure, Lan SiZhui.” Wen Ning nodded. Lan SiZhui returned it, then turned to Wen Qing.

“Wen Qing, let’s go to the cave to talk.”

“Ah, are you sure she should come with?” Wei WuXian asked, frowning. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Brother Wei, I assume you want to talk to me about the situation outside. It would be best if Wen Qing was present as well, seeing she is the leader of this branch of Wen and she is also responsible for their welfare.” He paused, then said: “I also just want her there.”

“Ah, SiZhui.” Wei WuXian frowned at him. “Since I last saw you, you’ve got an attitude!”

“Maybe.” Lan SiZhui said, glancing at Wen Qing. While he liked her and enjoyed her company, she was also someone who could anger him the easiest and also somehow made him respond her similarly to her own tone. Being around her lately, he got used to this.

“She can come.” Lan WangJi said, seeing Lan SiZhui’s look towards his cousin, probably interpreting as Lan SiZhui’s polite inquiry about whether she could go. In reality, Lan SiZhui wasn’t really looking for permission anyways, but he didn’t mention that. “Lead the way.” Lan SiZhui nodded, gesturing Wen Qing forward, who huffed, but headed inside the cave anyways.

The Wen gave them way and soon Lan SiZhui heard someone calling out to them to line up and receive their food rations. Lan SiZhui ignored the Wen’s noises in favor of watching Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi in front of him.

Wei WuXian had his flute in his sash, just like he would in the future as well. But unlike in the future, he also had his sword in his hand, gripping it confidently. He was still wearing the Jiang Sect’s dark, almost black, purple robes and red underrobes. Lan WangJi also looked

unaffected by the series of events. He was just as unruffled as always, walking with a straight back and one hand behind him while the other gripped Bichen.

They looked good. They looked almost unaffected by the war, both powerful and confident, smart and ready to help. Lan SiZhui smiled at this. He remembered a little about Wei WuXian from when they lived in the Burial Mounds; he remembered him wearing slightly ragged clothing, cheap and rough in material, though they didn't look that bad. They always hung off his frame, he couldn't really fill them how he did his clothes now. He was always pale and his eyes told a story of great responsibility and sorrow.

As they entered the cave, Lan SiZhui caught Wen Qing's eyes. The woman looked more like how he remembered her from his previous life, though that was not much, he could still tell this much. She was thin, though she carried herself with so much confidence, it was hard to tell; her presence filled the room. She was also tired and worried, Lan SiZhui could tell from the dark circles under her eyes and the wrinkle now constantly present between her brows.

"Ah, this place is nice!" Wei WuXian exclaimed as they gone deeper and deeper into the cave, passing the main chamber where the Wen slept while their houses were being built, heading into the tunnels leading to the bedchamber where Lan SiZhui insisted Granny, Wen Yuan, Wen Ning and Wen Qing shared with him. "SiZhui, did you make this yourself?"

Lan SiZhui looked around confused as to what Wei WuXian thought he'd made, then Wei WuXian touched the walls. He repressed the urge to roll his eyes.

"It was Xue ChongHai's residence when he lived here." He explained. He was about to tell Wei WuXian who Xue ChongHai was, but then Wei WuXian turned to look at him, interest and curiosity sparkling in his eyes.

"Really? Ah, is this where he fought the five Sects?"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, surprised that Wei WuXian knew this. "Brother Wei, have you heard of Xue ChongHai before?"

"Mn!" Wei WuXian nodded. "When me and Lan Zhan learned about the Yin Iron, Lan Yi told us about him. He was the one to cultivate the Yin Iron into the evil artefact it is now, and the five Sects had to go into battle to defeat him. Ah, if I remember correctly, it was Wen Mao who'd killed him in the end."

Lan SiZhui nodded. They continued their way into the bedchamber, where Granny was with A-Yuan. Lan SiZhui didn't expect them there, usually this time they would be out in the fields, playing. She looked spooked as they entered and Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi halted upon seeing her.

"It's alright." Wen Qing said. "You don't need to hide anymore. It's just these two who came, not the Sects."

By this, Lan SiZhui understood the situation. Granny most likely saw Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi coming and assumed the Sects had come to kill them all. She hid here to protect A-Yuan. Lan SiZhui stepped forward.

"Is A-Yuan alright?" He asked, peering at the baby. Wen Qing said A-Yuan was almost one year old, which, she explained, meant he would soon begin to babble and walk. For now, he was just crawling around, but Wen Qing said that was a good thing and meant that his poor diet didn't affect his growth too badly.

"He is fine." Granny smiled at him and picked up A-Yuan, who had been playing with some blank talisman papers. "Ah, we will go out then and not disturb the Young Masters." She said, carrying A-Yuan towards the tunnel. Lan SiZhui stepped out of the way and watched them go before turning back to Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi. Lan WangJi was looking at him strangely, though Wei WuXian was examining the inside of the bedchamber.

"Ah, I have to say, I'm disappointed." He said. "I expected something much more sinister than this."

"Sorry." Lan SiZhui said awkwardly. Before they could talk even more about the cave, Wen Qing turned to them and demanded:

"So, you're here to talk, so talk."

"Ah, right. Lady Wen, you're just as straightforward as you were when I first met you." Wei WuXian said with a grin, taking a seat on the table.

"I am not interested in your babble." She said, glaring at him. "Get to the point."

"So fierce!" Wei WuXian pouted. "How will anyone marry you with this attitude?"

"Wei WuXian!" She glared. Lan SiZhui sighed. These two were just like Lan JingYi and Jin Ling. It seemed he had to play mediator between them as well.

"Brother Wei, please, do not provoke Wen Qing."

"What's the fun in that?" Wei WuXian grinned at him. Wen Qing rolled her eyes.

"Wei Ying." Lan WangJi said evenly. Wei WuXian looked over, then he made a noise as if he just remembered something.

"Ah, right! Lan SiZhui, have you heard from Jin Ling or Lan JingYi lately?" He turned to Lan SiZhui.

Lan SiZhui shook his head, suddenly really anxious to hear about them. He withheld the urge to demand from Wei WuXian how they were, where were they and what happened to them. Wei WuXian nodded, as if he expected Lan SiZhui to not have heard from them.

"Then, let me tell you what happened." He said, and began telling Lan SiZhui what he'd missed. His story went like this:

After the four of them visited Qiongqi path, once he disappeared, for a little while the three of them waited for him in the rain where they said they would meet. Then Jin Ling was the one

to realize Lan SiZhui was not coming back and probably went back for the Wen. He asked Wei WuXian what they were talking about with Wen Qing, and once Wei WuXian told him they talked about Wen Yuan, Jin Ling exchanged a look with Lan JingYi, as if they knew something Wei WuXian didn't.

"We probably cannot stop Lan SiZhui, he's probably already working on freeing the Wen." Jin Ling concluded. "That idiot thinks he can do this himself, while we've already discussed he cannot. We should help him. Lan JingYi, go back to Koi Tower and tell Lan XiChen about this. Take Wei WuXian with you, we don't need him near the Wen." Wei WuXian found this exclamation strange, but he was used to the three of them being strange, so he just left them to it. Instead, he argued:

"Lan JingYi can carry the message alone, but if I go with you, the two of us will have more of a chance to stop or help Lan SiZhui."

"Who wants you to help or stop Lan SiZhui?!"

Since Wei WuXian knew Jin Ling would say this, he was already preparing his next argument: "Well then, how about this? What if you or him get injured and you need to be taken to a healer right away and you cannot fly your swords? Isn't it smarter to bring someone who can?"

At this, Lan JingYi also spoke up: "Who would fly in this weather? It's dangerous. I'll also have to ride back to Lanling via horse."

At this, Jin Ling also said: "Besides, have you forgotten that Wen Qing is a doctor? More so, she is Lan SiZhui's doctor. If either of us gets injured, she'll just treat us."

Currently, Wen Qing rolled her eyes and huffed: "As if." Wei WuXian nodded at this.

"Jin Ling is truly very arrogant. You would think since he's an orphan, he would be more humble."

"Since everyone pitied him for being an orphan, Jin Ling had always been indulged." Lan SiZhui explained. "Surely, Brother Wei is familiar with this." There was a pause, then as they understood what Lan SiZhui meant, Wen Qing covered her smile and looked away to chuckle into her hand.

"Lan SiZhui, so mean!" Wei WuXian pouted at him, and Lan SiZhui shrugged. "Anyways, let me continue."

Wei WuXian really wanted to go with Jin Ling and help the Wen, so he kept arguing. "They might respect you for your title, MouShi, but you're still just a Jin disciple. I'm the head disciple of the Jiang Sect and ward of Sect Leader Jiang, so if the guards try to stop us, they

cannot offend me without risking bringing the wrath of the Jiang Sect onto themselves. The Jin are stupid but not complete idiots, so they won't dare to do so."

In the end, what convinced him was Lan JingYi, not Wei WuXian. "Jin Ling, he is right. You'll have more advantages if you bring him with you. Besides, he's the only one who would be able to stop Lan SiZhui if he lost control of the Yin Iron."

Jin Ling didn't look happy as he agreed to bring Wei WuXian with him. He told Lan JingYi to hurry, then Lan JingYi rode along the opposite direction than where Wei WuXian and Jin Ling were going. They rode for a while before they were stopped again. At first, Wei WuXian thought the white-robed man in the middle of the path was Lan SiZhui, but soon he recognized Lan WangJi, so the two of them slowed down to see where he was going.

"I heard Wei Ying is at Qiongqi Path." Lan WangJi said. "Came to meet him there." Wei WuXian felt really honored that such a renowned person was looking for him like this in the rain.

"Lan Zhan, you only have an umbrella and no horse! You can't walk around like this!" Wei WuXian told him. At this, Jin Ling became impatient.

"Wei WuXian, we don't have time for this." He said and then looked at Lan WangJi. "Hanguang-Jun, as you can see, Wei WuXian is busy. Please, go back to Lanling." According to Wei WuXian, this was really rude, so he immediately jumped on Lan WangJi's defense.

"You can't tell Lan Zhan what to do!" He said, but Jin Ling just rolled his eyes at this.

"I can come with." Lan WangJi offered, though from Lan WangJi's expression, Lan SiZhui suspected he didn't say it with so many words. "Help Wei Ying in his mission."

Wei WuXian was about to accept, but then Jin Ling opened his mouth once again. "No way!" He rejected harshly. "I'd rather go alone than have Hanguang-Jun come with!"

Here, Wei WuXian and Jin Ling began to argue once more, and Lan WangJi in the meantime decided to head towards Qiongqi. However, Jin Ling noticed this and cut him off with his horse.

"Where do you think you're going?" He asked. Lan WangJi just glared at him, which Wei WuXian found funny, since Lan WangJi just said he was going to Qiongqi. Seemingly, however, Jin Ling really didn't want this, so he turned to Lan WangJi. "Hanguang-Jun, you just came for Wei WuXian, right?"

"Mn." Lan WangJi nodded.

"Then, how about this; how about if Wei WuXian stays here with you, then you won't have to dirty your boots with the walk?" Jin Ling said arrogantly, though Lan WangJi didn't let it bother him, he just quietly accepted.

This seemingly meant Wei WuXian was to stay where he was and Jin Ling rode off without much else. Wei WuXian then turned to Lan WangJi, who demanded what was going on –



again, Lan SiZhui doubted in so many words – and so Wei WuXian had to tell him, then try to convince him not to go after Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui.

Soon, they met Jin Ling again, who was coming back from Qiongqi. Seeing Lan WangJi's expression, he suspected what had happened, that Wei WuXian told him about Lan SiZhui, and so he told them to go back to Lanling.

Once they were back, Jin Ling asked them to not say anything to anyone and went to look for Lan XiChen and Lan JingYi. The night had passed without anything happening. The next day the smaller Clans were expected to leave while the main Sects would stay for one more day to relax before going back to their own homes. However, that afternoon Sect Leader Jin had called the main Sects for an urgent discussion.

As Wei WuXian entered, he noticed Lan JingYi and Jin Ling sitting together, mostly calm. They were carefully watching the people around them. Wei WuXian wanted to go and talk to them, but he knew he shouldn't, so he sat next to Jiang Cheng and waited for the topic to be brought up, as it had been.

"Friends!" Jin GuangShan spoke up once everyone was seated. "It had come to my attention that there had been an incident regarding the Wen cultivators we have contained. They had been freed from their prison and we've lost them. The guards there reported that earlier that day four cultivators have visited the Wen and two of them engaged in intimate discussion with one. They said MouShi, Feng CiKe, ChunYu-Jun and Wei WuXian had gone there. Could these four people please step forward?"

Jiang Cheng had then leaned over to Wei WuXian and whispered: "What is he talking about? Is that where you've disappeared to last night?"

Wei WuXian ignored him and stood, joining Jin Ling and Lan JingYi in the middle of the reception hall.

"What is the meaning of this?" Jiang FengMian asked, sounding confused and offended.

"Sect Leader Jiang, I'll tell you in a moment." Jin GuangShan said. "But where is ChunYu-Jun?"

Everyone then turned to Lan XiChen, who sat with an unreadable expression. He told Jin GuangShan: "Sect Leader Jin, I have many disciples here. It is not my duty to keep track of all of them."

Though this was not a lie, it still didn't answer the question. From this, Wei WuXian suspected this was some kind of tactic the Lan and Jin Ling came up with, so he also kept his mouth shut. Once it became evident that nobody would answer Jin GuangShan, he moved on. He asked the three of them to tell him what they were doing there and what they've done. Surprisingly Jin Ling stepped forward, talking politely but confidently.

"Sect Leader Jin, everyone, I feel the need to correct Sect Leader Jin. To understand what we were doing, I should be telling you who those Wen were, and perhaps answer a few rumors." Here, he looked at Jin ZiXun pointedly.

“This begins at the indoctrination in Qishan, where the Sects' Young Masters had been taken, including Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui, who had been also injured by the Wen back then. They had been forced to face an ancient being that had killed many of theirs and ours as well, the Tortoise of Slaughter. To get out of the situation, Lan SiZhui had risked his own life to find a way out of the cave by guiding a stranger's sword towards the exit. Later, it turned out that this sword actually belonged to one of Lan SiZhui's relatives, a Wen.”

Before he could continue, someone spoke up from the crowd.

“MouShi, no offence, but what is the point of this tale? Are you going to tell us the whole story of the Sunshot Campaign? We've been there, we know what happened.”

Jin Ling scoffed at him. “Since you think you know so much, why ask us what happened?” He paused. “You don't know? Then hear me out and you'll learn.”

This shut the person up quickly and Jin GuangShan gestured Jin Ling to continue.

“So, about this sword. Lan SiZhui had used this sword several times during the war, to help the Sects. Then after the discussion conference in Nightless City, after the Sunshot Campaign concluded, Lan SiZhui had decided to go and return the sword to the person it belonged to. This was another branch of the Wen Sect that had stayed out of the war, mainly due to the many elderly and young people living amongst them. They were also Wen Qing, Wen RuoHan's personal doctor's Clan. Sect Leader Jiang remembers that after the attack on Lotus Pier, Lan SiZhui had taken us to Wen Qing to treat our injuries, which she did and much more. She saved us from being discovered by Wen Chao, and more so, she put her life on the line. She actually exposed herself to Wen Chao in helping us, and because of this, her own people turned against her.

“Lan SiZhui and us freed Wen Qing and her brother, Wen Ning, who at the time had been badly injured, so the two of them returned to their home and secluded themselves from the world. It's most likely they hardly even knew about the war at all. Anyways, that's not the point. The sword Lan SiZhui had had been one of theirs, and so Lan SiZhui decided to visit them and return the sword. In doing so, he decided to spend some time with his long lost relatives. During his stay, however, the Wen had been attacked.

“Although I wasn't there, I've seen and heard the aftermath of this attack. The Jin Sect had come and told Lan SiZhui one of his friends had written a letter to the Jin Sect, telling them how Lan SiZhui had been manipulated into going to the Wen village and how the Wen kept him there by force. However, we have found no evidence of this letter and even according to Sect Leader Jin it is not currently present.”

Jin GuangShan agreed, saying: “It had been stolen, yes.”

“But Sect Leader Jin, how do we know this letter existed at all?” Jin Ling asked boldly, causing several people to protest in outrage. Wei WuXian found this mostly funny.

Jin GuangYao even stood and said: “MouShi, I can assure you, I took the letter to Sect Leader Jin myself and several people had seen the messenger who brought it.”

“I’m sure of that.” Jin Ling said, strangely flippant. “However, without evidence, how could we be sure that the letter said what you say it had?”

This caused even more outrage. However, Lan XiChen put an end to the accusations by simply saying Jin Ling’s name, who appeared annoyed by that, but he carried on.

“This is not the point, however. Lan SiZhui had been attacked and brought here, along with those Wen who had nothing to do with the whole thing. However, the Jin Sect felt that since they’ve acted out of self-defense and protected their own, they should be imprisoned. Lan SiZhui believed that they did not deserve to be kept like so and wanted to make sure that even though they were kept prisoners, the Wen had been kept in good conditions, so we went there to see for ourselves.”

With this story concluded, quiet descended on the reception hall. Everyone was confused and surprised by this. However, Jin GuangShan had an answer to this also:

“MouShi, you told this story for the sake of others, but I’m aware of this. I also told Lan SiZhui that we’ve been investigating the disappearance of the letter and also that once it came to the trial of these Wen, he could be present and tell his side of the story.”

“The point is not whether the Wen had been treated right or not.” Jin ZiXun argued. “It is where the Wen had gone and who have taken them. Since ChunYu-Jun is not here, I think we can all assume he is the one who took them.”

This worried Wei WuXian. He wasn’t sure what Jin Ling and Lan JingYi were playing at and he didn’t like not knowing how to defend his friend. At the same time, he didn’t want to speak out, in case he messed up Jin Ling’s plan, whatever that might be. Jin Ling didn’t answer this, just tilted his head to the side, appearing calm.

“Well?” Asked Jin GuangShan, “MouShi, is this true?”

Jin Ling answered: “And if it is?”

Jin ZiXun got angry at this and said: “MouShi, you can hang out all you want with the Lan and act as if you’re better than us all, but you’re still a Jin disciple. You still answer to Sect Leader Jin.”

“I just have.” Jin Ling said arrogantly. This caused a bigger argument amongst people, and for a little bit, the question of the Wen had been forgotten. Once Jin GuangShan got the room under control, however, he told everyone that they were done with the topic for the day.

The next day they have, once again, asked Jin Ling whether Lan SiZhui took the Wen or not. This wasn’t public, however Wei WuXian found Lan JingYi waiting outside a building in Koi Tower and he happened to be there when Jin Ling came out and complained about this to his friend. They didn’t talk much about this in public, however Wei WuXian understood that by the fourth day, the Jin Sect knew it was Lan SiZhui who took the Wen and were then trying to get their location out of Jin Ling. Even Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng were asked by Madam Yu as to where Lan SiZhui was, but they didn’t know.

“From here, the story isn’t really interesting.” Wei WuXian said. “Since then, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi had been constantly inquired about your whereabouts, even though they keep telling them they don’t know. Once, Jin Ling wanted to go on a night-hunt, but Jin GuangShan didn’t let him until he told them where you were.” Wei WuXian made a face. “You can imagine how well Jin Ling took that.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “But then, brother Wei, what made you and Hanguang-Jun come here?”

“Ah, I haven’t told you that yet, have I?” Wei WuXian perked up, then picked up his storytelling once more.

Weeks later they were still there, discussing this. One day, after being denied to leave once again, Jin Ling invited Wei WuXian over to his rooms for dinner. Thinking Jin Ling wanted to drink with him, Wei WuXian arrived in good spirits, only to find Lan JingYi, Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi also sitting there! As soon as he entered, they even activated a silencing talisman.

They invited him to sit, then Jin Ling turned to him with a sour expression.

“You need to go to the Burial Mounds.” He said as if this was the worst thing that could happen to him. Wei WuXian didn’t understand.

“Young Master Wei, you must know that we’re being very closely watched.” Lan JingYi said, much more pleasant than Jin Ling. Wei WuXian didn’t know this, and so he turned to his closest friend here for confirmation. Lan WangJi also nodded. “Yesterday I went to the market in Lanling and found four Jin soldiers following me.” Lan JingYi brought this up as an example.

“But if you’re being followed, why do you think I am not? After all, I was also at Qionggqi that night.”

Lan XiChen said: “I’m sure you are, Young Master Wei. But unlike the Lan and Jin Ling, you are not closely associated with Lan SiZhui, so you’re free to move around.”

Seeing that Wei WuXian didn’t understand this, Lan JingYi explained: “I went on a night-hunt nearby with some brothers the other day and we were followed by some Jin. They almost got themselves killed, trying to hide from us, that’s why we know they were there. Young Master Wei, I think Jin GuangShan is trying to follow us and by this have us reveal where Lan SiZhui is hiding. Since you’re not as closely associated with Lan SiZhui, we think if you go out with the reason of going on a night-hunt, they won’t follow you as closely. Alternatively, you’re very perceptive, so I think you have the most chance of getting rid of your shadows in order to get a message to Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui doubted this last part was said, but he didn’t interrupt Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian then asked: “Why don’t you just send a message to Lan SiZhui?”

“Our letters are being captured and read before they’re delivered.” Jin Ling answered.

“What about Sect Leader Lan’s messages? Surely, those aren’t read.”

“That is true, however when I sent a letter home to Grandmaster, the disciple delivering it reported that a Jin disciple followed him all the way there. We suspect they’re doing this to all my letters, to confirm their destination.”

Wei WuXian thought if they really wanted to, they could’ve sent a message anyways. Send one home then have someone else take it to Lan SiZhui – surely, not all disciples’ personal letters were handled the same way. He didn’t say this aloud though, confident that these people have thought of this before and dismissed the idea for a reason. And so, he began to think about him delivering the message.

“ZeWu-Jun,” Wei WuXian began, “if we go with this plan, we need to think this through. Since I’ll be giving the excuse to go on a night-hunt, firstly, I’ll need to go on an actual night-hunt. I’ll send word home to the disciples, see if they heard of anything that needs to be done in YiLing area. Secondly, I cannot go alone. It would be suspicious. Should I bring Jiang Cheng with me?”

“We thought about this all before.” Jin Ling said, arrogant and self-satisfied as usual. “Un— Young Master Jiang is not very fond of the Wen, and I have a feeling if you were to take him with you, he’d either tell Sect Leader Jiang or try to stop you, or even try to fight Lan SiZhui. Since he is the person you usually go night-hunting with, it would seem suspicious if you took a random disciple. But you also have the reputation of hanging out with another person a lot, so it would not seem strange for you to go with them on this night-hunt, and he also already agreed.”

This was when Wei WuXian realized he would get to go on a night-hunt with Lan WangJi! He was very excited. He said: “Lan Zhan, we get to go on a night-hunt and a secret mission together! Aren’t you happy?”

As usual, Lan WangJi didn’t answer, but this did nothing to dampen Wei WuXian’s spirits. Instead, ZeWu-Jun answered:

“Young Master Wei, you must understand how important this is. It is dangerous to lead the Jin to where Lan SiZhui is. These boys have a reason to think the Wen would be killed without a second thought.” This made Wei WuXian suspect this had something to do with the three strange boys’ secrets and decided to use this opportunity.

He said: “Alright. If I do this for you, you have to promise to tell me what is it you’re hiding ever since you’ve arrived.”

At this, Jin Ling got angry. “Wei WuXian, I thought Lan SiZhui was your friend. If you don’t want to help him, then just say that and don’t waste our time!”

Wei WuXian was offended by this accusation. “He’s my friend and I want to help him, but I also want to know your secrets!”

“Why do you need to know? It doesn’t affect you at all! Leave us alone already!”

At this, Lan XiChen tried to step in and make peace between them. He said:

“Naturally, Young Master Wei is curious. We cannot fault him for this. However, Young Master Wei, this is not something we can share with you. Please, do not ask about this anymore.”

Since Lan XiChen was a Sect Leader, Wei WuXian didn’t have much choice but to agree and let the matter drop. He agreed the plan and soon they heard back from Yunmeng about some fierce corpses in the area. Wei WuXian decided to ask Sect Leader Jiang if he could go during one of the breakfasts they had in the Jin’s reception hall and hearing this, Lan WangJi would also request to go with him. Making this a public affair worked in their favor, since it appeared the whole thing was Wei WuXian’s idea alone and Lan WangJi just tagged along. Wei WuXian also said he would return to Yunmeng to visit his sister and Madam Yu after this, so the Jin wouldn’t think he was delivering messages between the Lan and Lan SiZhui.

The Jin still followed them, though it was only two disciples and Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi quickly lost them after they’ve concluded their night-hunt in the area. They came to the Burial Mounds with some Graveyard-Purging talismans Lan XiChen had given them, unsure of the state of the Burial Mounds. All they said about this was this:

“Lan SiZhui had been living there for three months. He knows that place well. He was going to try to cleanse it, but with his spiritual powers missing, we aren’t sure if he succeeds. It’s best if you go prepared in case he couldn’t do it.”

And so, Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi followed Lan JingYi and Jin Ling’s directions as to how to get inside and where to go. Now here they were.

“So, we had to listen to all this, just to conclude there’s a message to Lan SiZhui?” Wen Qing raised an eyebrow and Wei WuXian pouted.

“Lady Wen, naturally, the whole story is relevant to the message, or else I wouldn’t have told it.” He said.

“So, what’s this message?” She asked, seemingly impatient. Lan SiZhui couldn’t fault her, for he was also curious, though he appreciated that Wei WuXian told them all this, so he knew why his friends haven’t contacted him sooner. He didn’t think the Jin would be so strict with this, though it made sense.

“Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi wanted you to know that the Jin are looking for you. Not just by following them but also searching the land. Jin Ling said he overheard some conversations about this and it seems the Jin have been terrorizing the remaining Wen in the

Wen Sect's old territory, thinking you're hiding there, but that they've been over most places and most likely will soon begin looking elsewhere."

"Will they be able to enter here?" Wen Qing asked, turning to Lan SiZhui. He looked back at her steadily.

"If they figure out that the Burial Mounds had been cleansed, they might."

"You don't seem overly worried about this." Wen Qing said, her gaze sharpening. Lan SiZhui smiled at her.

"As long as I'm here, I won't let anything happen to the Wen. I'm not concerned because I know I would be able to win against the Sects. I just wish I didn't have to."

"Aren't you overly confident?"

"Maybe." Lan SiZhui shrugged.

In reality, he knew he was right. With the amount of resentful energy dormant in the Burial Mounds and Lan SiZhui's demonic cultivation, he could easily win over the five Sects' armies, much like how Xue ChongHai had overpowered them in the past. Although as he said, Lan SiZhui didn't want to do so.

"Did they say anything else?" Lan SiZhui asked. To this, Lan WangJi nodded.

"Lan JingYi also had a message to you. He wanted to remind you of where you've come from and of your responsibilities." Lan SiZhui bowed his head. Lan JingYi was right. Even though he could end the four Sects' armies, he should not do so. Since he already hoped he would not need to, he accepted this.

"Jin Ling also said that they were going to keep trying to convince the Sects." Wei WuXian said. "I'm not sure they would be able to, though Sect Leader Nie is also on their side as well as Sect Leader Lan and Uncle Jiang isn't convinced by the Jin Sect either. Let us hope they succeed."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, having no doubt that Jin Ling and Lan JingYi would try their best, although not believing they would succeed.

"Ah, Lan SiZhui, it's getting late and we're tired, where are we going to sleep?" Wei WuXian asked, grinning at him. Lan SiZhui made a face at him, knowing that this was not going to please Wen Qing. As expected, she turned her sharp gaze at the two of them.

"Wei WuXian, we've let you into our home and now you demand even more?!"

"Lady Wen, aren't we your guests?" Wei WuXian looked back at her with wide eyes. "Lan SiZhui is our sworn brother, so we're family now. Say, big sister, will you lend us a piece of floor to sleep on?"

"Don't you have enough money to sleep in YiLing?" Wen Qing huffed, clearly annoyed by the way Wei WuXian addressed her. "We don't have space for you to sleep." At this, Wei

WuXian pouted.

“But big sister, YiLing is so far away. Take pity on these weary travelers!”

“It’s fine.” Lan SiZhui told Wen Qing. “They can stay here.”

“And where will you sleep then?” Wen Qing cocked an eyebrow. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“I’ll sleep outside with the others. It’s fine.”

“Fine, so be it.” She rolled her eyes, but didn’t argue any more. “Make yourselves at home then. I have to go help prepare dinner.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui told her, but she ignored him as she walked past and into the main chamber. Lan SiZhui turned to Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian. Remembering his manners, he looked around and said: “Ah, sorry about the accommodations, they’re not the best I’m afraid.”

“It’s fine.” Wei WuXian smiled at him, looking around as well. “So, this is where you live now. It is quite different from the luxury of Cloud Recesses.”

“It’s not that bad.” Lan SiZhui said. “I’ve lived in a similar place when I was very young, so it’s fine.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian hummed, still looking around, then sighed and turned to Lan SiZhui. “SiZhui, you’ve tricked me at Qiongqi.” He said this uncharacteristically seriously. Lan SiZhui bowed his head.

“Sorry.” He muttered, then when there was no answer, he knew Wei WuXian wanted a proper answer. He sighed and went over to sit on the bed. “Brother Wei, I have a confession to make.” Wei WuXian prompted him with a raise of his eyebrows, so Lan SiZhui continued. “This situation is not completely alien to me. In the past...” He hesitated, not knowing how to phrase this in a way that would not give him away. He felt like the first time they arrived and he went to Lan XiChen for advice, only back then, it turned out, he actually gave themselves away. Though Wei WuXian didn’t have the same clues Lan XiChen had back then, so it was safer to tell him. “I’ve told you about my former adoptive father, right?”

“Ah...” Wei WuXian frowned, seemingly trying hard to remember. “You spoke of him here and there. I don’t remember. For a Lan, SiZhui, you speak so much!” He grinned. Lan SiZhui returned his smile.

“My former adoptive father had taken me and my family away. At the time my family was also in danger from other people, so he had to take them away by rebelling against his own people. Because of this, his people had disowned him. Because of this, because of us, he had a very hard life after that.”

“Is that why he’s dead?” Wei WuXian asked, tilting his head to the side curiously. Lan SiZhui shrugged.



“Partially. This is actually something I do not wish to talk about.” He shook his head. “Anyways, the point is, if I didn’t trick you or Jin Ling and Lan JingYi, you’d have insisted on coming with me. What happened in the past, I do not wish that to repeat. I didn’t want Jin Ling to lose what little family he has, Lan JingYi his hard-earned place in the Sect and his only home. And naturally, I didn’t want you to lose your family over this. The Wen are, while your friends, not your concern. I understand the urge, the need to help them. This speaks a lot about your personality; you’re actually a very righteous person who cannot stand seeing injustice.

“However, while this is admirable, it is also something that gets you into a lot of trouble. You’re already fighting Sect Leader Jiang and I understand your relationship with Madam Yu is... complicated. If you did this with me, they wouldn’t have taken this lightly. Besides the personal relationships, there is also the political pressure they would need to face. Since I’ve already parted from the Lan Sect, if the Sects try to force ZeWu-Jun to do something about my situation, he can claim I am not his responsibility. However, Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu cannot say the same. They would need to either cut ties with you or take action against you. I assume you do not wish to fight your family like this.”

“SiZhui, don’t you think this should be my decision to make?”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui answered honestly. “And I know it would’ve been the one that would’ve caused you many hardships, so I made the decision for you. While I’m not proud of this act, neither towards you, Lan JingYi, nor Jin Ling, I wouldn’t’ve acted different under any circumstances. This was the right decision to make.”

“The right decision?” Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows. Looking so serious and grim, Lan SiZhui felt like he was talking to the YiLing Patriarch instead of the Wei WuXian he got to know in the past year and half.

“Wei Ying.” Lan WangJi said softly, but it was as if Wei WuXian didn’t even hear him.

“Lan SiZhui, who decides what is right and what is wrong? Who decides what is black and what is white?!”

“This is the very same question I’ve been asking myself for a long while now.” Lan SiZhui told him calmly in the face of Wei WuXian’s anger.

“The rules are clear.” Lan WangJi said, and Lan SiZhui heard annoyance and anger from his tone. He smiled at him.

“Hanguang-Jun, what do you think; were these Wen in the wrong to defend their home, their loved ones and themselves from the Jin?”

“No.” Lan WangJi said tightly.

“Then, do you think they deserved to be imprisoned and abused by the Jin?”

“Act against injustice diplomatically first, not by force.” Lan SiZhui nodded, expecting this answer. He marveled at how different this Lan WangJi was from the Hanguang-Jun he grew

up with. It wasn't that he had different values, but his views differed slightly. The Hanguang-Jun he knew would not have tried to act diplomatically first if he knew that would not work. However, this Lan WangJi would have.

"Then, Hanguang-Jun, what if the people who are supposed to be diplomatic are too biased?"

"You do not know until you try." Lan WangJi told him. At this, even Wei WuXian laughed.

"Lan Zhan, tell me, when would've the Jin pardoned the Wen?" He asked, looking at Lan WangJi with humor in his eyes.

"Then the Jin are not fit judges of the situation and should be removed from this position, giving the power to judge to an unbiased jury."

"Lan Zhan, who is unbiased against the Wen?" Wei WuXian huffed. "Besides, the Jin would rather go to war again than give power over."

"Wei Ying has very low opinion of the Jin." Lan WangJi said as if he was done with the conversation. Wei WuXian laughed out loud.

"Lan Zhan, don't I have reason for this? Just look at how they've acted against Lan SiZhui. They rather risked offending the Lan Sect than letting them deal with a supposed threat that had nothing to do with them." At this, Lan WangJi frowned and remained quiet. Wei WuXian turned back to Lan SiZhui. "But this wasn't what we were talking about, SiZhui. You made a decision that was not yours to make. Do you think your reasoning is justifiable?"

"I do not care if it is." Lan SiZhui smiled at him bitterly. "Brother Wei, I'd rather have you hating me for the rest of my life than ruining yours. For this, I will not apologize."

"Lan SiZhui, when I met you, you were a very uptight, rule-obeying Lan. Almost like another Lan Zhan! I even began to think all Lan were like you two fuddy-duddies." He pouted. "Now you're being so mean and stubborn, as if I was listening to a much more polite Jiang Cheng. What happened to you?"

"I probably spent too much time with Jin Ling." Lan SiZhui shrugged, then stood. "Dinner is ready soon. Let us go and eat." With this, he headed outside, not checking if Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian followed.

His heart was beating wildly in his chest, and he thought his last statement might not have been as big of a joke as he intended it to be. He felt ashamed for speaking to Wei WuXian the way he did. If he was in the Cloud Recesses, he would have been punished severely for this, and even though he wasn't even part of the Sect anymore, he felt like he would've largely deserved it as well.



The next morning Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi were still there. It wasn't that Lan SiZhui expected them to leave right away, but he didn't really understand why they were still there. For the morning he tried to entertain them, made them tea of the precious small collection he

had from his days in Lanling, talked to them about neutral topics, but soon he had to realize this wasn't going to work. He had to go back to work and every implication he had made towards the two that it was time for them to go, they ignored it and stayed.

Finally, he could not put his work aside anymore. It wasn't that the Wen demanded his presence, more so, they told him to take his time. But Lan SiZhui felt like if he wasn't helping the Wen he was just a burden to them, so he excused himself from the two Young Masters' entertainment.

"Work?" Wei WuXian asked, perking up. He had been playing with his tea for the past half an hour or so, but now he looked interested.

"Ah, yes..." Lan SiZhui said hesitantly.

"Lan SiZhui, I didn't know you worked here. Show me what you do!" He grinned. Lan SiZhui looked over to Lan WangJi, hoping the other would tell Wei WuXian not to bother him, but Lan WangJi was busy arranging his limbs into meditation pose.

"Ah, sure." Lan SiZhui gave in and led Wei WuXian towards where the other Wen were working on the houses. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to explain this to Wei WuXian or if he should just ignore him and get to work. However, Wei WuXian solved this dilemma by kneeling down and picking up a handsaw.

"SiZhui, did you know, even though I'm not from a good family, Sect Leader Jiang raised me as if I was Jiang Cheng's brother, so I never had to do actual hard labor." He looked up at Lan SiZhui. "Naturally, the Lan are even good at this. Would this Master please teach me?"

"Um..." Lan SiZhui looked over at the men he was working with. They looked back at him with amusement in their gazes, so he would not get any help from them. "I can try?" Lan SiZhui chanced. Wei WuXian didn't seem to notice his dubious tone and instead beamed up at him as if he was a child who got his way with his parent. Lan SiZhui snorted, an ugly sound to express his amusement at the irony of that metaphor.

He pulled up two stools and gestured at one. Wei WuXian sat obediently, and Lan SiZhui settled onto the other one. At first, he was nervous as he began to explain, about half convinced that Wei WuXian was just joking and he actually knew how to do this. However, Wei WuXian listened to his every word and paid close attention. A small smile played in the corner of his mouth, but it seemed more out of joy than malice.

Slowly, Lan SiZhui relaxed into the explanation. It wasn't that he knew this craft all that well and he would not say he was any good at teaching – not having any experience in this material whatsoever – but he found that he enjoyed doing this with Wei WuXian. The other boy was sharp and picked up on things quick. He was also very relaxed, joking here and there, which made even the Wen working next to them laugh.

As Wei WuXian began to work without Lan SiZhui's help, they soon fell into a comfortable silence, working side-by-side. Once Wen Han came by to drop off some materials that needed to be cut and prepared for building and commented on Wei WuXian's presence.

“Young Master Lan, if your tactic to turn the Sects on our side is to have them do work for us, we should start paying them, or else they might rebel!” He grinned good-naturedly.

“Ah, Brother Wei just wanted to learn.” Lan SiZhui tried to explain.

“I assume Young Master Lan also wanted to learn.” Wen Han chuckled, gesturing over. Lan SiZhui looked over and saw Lan WangJi sitting next to Wen Qing, who was explaining something to him as he slowly stirred something in a pot.

“Ah! Wen Qing must’ve bullied him into this. I’ll go and—”

“SiZhui.” Wei WuXian drawled, getting hold of his arm before he could stand. Lan SiZhui looked over at him. “Lan Zhan is capable of saying no if he doesn’t want to do something. Let him do whatever.”

“Ah, but...” Lan SiZhui began, but he already knew he was not going to finish his argument. He sighed and sat back. “She forbids me of doing anything, but if she sees anyone else slacking, she must bully them into work.” He muttered under his breath as he picked up his saw.

“Lan SiZhui, you’re our cousin and injured.” Wen Ning said from where he was helping Wen Han get the material off the cart. “Naturally, she doesn’t want you to work like this.”

“Jiang Cheng does the same.” Wei WuXian said. “I think this is their way of showing their love.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning nodded, smiling at Wei WuXian who returned it.

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That night Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi stayed again. Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure if he should just accept this or protest. However, they actually helped out, so even Wen Qing didn’t complain much.

Throughout the next few days, the two of them stayed and helped. The houses were being built slowly, four of the six planned already finished, so they were making good progress. The only issue they had was the food supply. Their corps would not sprout until the spring at least, so they needed to buy food throughout the winter. They were low on money, so they had to ration their food strictly, which meant more often than not people ate less than they should.

He also needed to think about what to do if or when the Sects came. When he decided to go back for the Wen at Qiongqi, he didn’t really think this plan through.

Firstly, Lan JingYi was right. They were in the past, which meant he should not harm the army that came for them – not that he wanted to harm them anyways. He wished the four Sects wouldn’t come for the Wen at all in the first place. But they were and he had to think of how to handle this.

If he didn't have such restrictions, Lan SiZhui would use his demonic cultivation to get the upper hand. After all, he was just a lone man against four Sects' armies. If he was bold enough, he would use the same score Su She used in the future to take away the Sects' spiritual powers when they came to the Burial Mounds to save the juniors and fight Wei WuXian. He might still do so – since this was temporary and would not seriously harm them, he would chance it.

The only issue was he did not know the song. He would need to figure it out first – he was fairly sure this was also some old scores of the Qin language. He knew the song played by Su She was from the *Collection of Turmoil*, a malicious collection from a distant land. This however didn't mean it had nothing to do with the old Qin language and the *Collection of Time*.

He had already begun to work on something, but as long as he couldn't test it, he wouldn't know if it worked or not.

If it didn't, he would also need to begin thinking about how else to stop the Sects. If it wasn't for them being in the past, he would awaken the now dormant resentful energy in the Burial Mounds and stop them using his demonic cultivation. This was not ideal for many reasons however. Firstly, by using his demonic cultivation, Lan SiZhui would prove to the Sects that he was corrupted. This would also raise resentful energy around the Wen and they would not be able to take it as cultivators could. Lan SiZhui wished he didn't have to think about these things, but he had to.

A few days went by, while Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian did not budge from their spot in the camp, and the Wen already began to feel comfortable around them. However, the more time passed and the longer the two were present, the more anxious Lan SiZhui became. The Sects could come for the Wen any moment and similarly, they could start looking for Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi at any moment as well. He needed to prepare for the fight and also get the two to go away as soon as possible.

This was, naturally, easier said than done. When he brought up the issue one night at dinner, Wei WuXian simply answered:

“Why would they look for me? They know I'm on a night-hunt and they also know I'm with Lan Zhan. Naturally, I'm going to take my time on this one.”

“Brother Wei, while this might be true, do you think they could also come to the conclusion that since you are on a night-hunt with Hanguang-Jun, you should be much quicker to figure out the hunt and head back? After all, you two are the head disciples of your Sects and Hanguang-Jun is also known to not liking idling about.” Lan SiZhui tried to reason as well.

“Ah, but SiZhui, if he doesn't like to idle about, what is he still doing here? Huh?” Wei WuXian asked back arrogantly. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“Naturally, Hanguang-Jun doesn't trust us. He's not going to leave you here alone, so as long as you're here, he's going to stay as well.”

“Huh?” Wei WuXian frowned at him. “What are you talking about? Of course, we trust you.”

Lan SiZhui smiled at him bitterly. “But what reason do you have to? I’m a demonic cultivator, I’ve proven that time and time again, and these people are Wen. Even if they’re old and young and powerless, they’re still Wen. Hanguang-Jun is doing the right thing, not trusting us. It’s alright, I’m not offended. I’m just not sure you’re aware of the situation.”

“Lan Zhan! You really don’t think that, do you?” Wei WuXian turned to his friend, who, instead of answering, took a sip of water. “Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian slapped the table.

“Wei WuXian. Lan SiZhui is too polite to say this, but your presence is unsettling here. It would be better if you left now.” Wen Qing said from the other end of the table. Wen Ning was watching the drama unfold with his spoon halfway to his mouth.

“Wen Qing, the truth is, you’re my friends. All of you now, after a few days spent together.” Wei WuXian answered with a serious tone, looking around. “You’re old and young and powerless, that is true. Even Lan SiZhui is. So, if we leave here, how could we trust you to protect yourselves from the Sects?”

“Lan SiZhui said he can take care of it, didn’t he?” Wen Qing clicked her tongue.

“Lan SiZhui has also lied to me in the past, so I do not trust his word either.” Wei WuXian answered condescendingly.

“You claim to be his friend, yet you have so little faith in him. He cleansed the Burial Mounds, hasn’t he? What is there he cannot do?” Wen Qing answered arrogantly, and to that, even Wei WuXian couldn’t say anything.

“Brother Wei, we appreciate the concern, but it would be better if you went back now.” Lan SiZhui said to settle tempers. “We will be fine on our own.”

“We will leave in the morning.” Lan WangJi said calmly.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian protested. “We cannot just leave these people like this.” Lan WangJi didn’t answer, just returned to his dinner. This seemed to annoy Wei WuXian, but he also became quiet then and didn’t protest any more. Lan SiZhui was relieved. He looked over and caught Wen Qing’s eyes, who was looking at him with a searching look. As soon as their gazes met, she gestured to Lan SiZhui’s food, then turned back to her own dinner.

## Despair I.

The next morning after the whole camp was awake, Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian prepared for their parting. Lan SiZhui was patient and let them say goodbye to the few Wen they became almost friends with. Not wanting to disturb them, Lan SiZhui stood to the side with Wen Ning, waiting to accompany them to the edge of the Burial Mounds. However, before they could properly depart, some Wen a few paces away called out in fright. Lan SiZhui afraid it was a fierce corpse or something of that effect, quickly hurried over to see what the fuss was about.

When he arrived, however, he found none of these situations, but a messenger talisman instead, the kind the Lan usually used within smaller, but out of earshot distances.

Lan SiZhui looked around, but he also found Lan WangJi among the crowd collected there, looking curious. He was the one to step forward and lean down for the messenger. He paused before fully straightening up.

“It has brother’s spiritual energy.” He said, looking over at Wei WuXian and Lan SiZhui. The two of them also shared a look and stepped forward.

“What does it say?” Wei WuXian asked. Lan WangJi studied the message for a long minute, then he looked up and looked into Lan SiZhui’s eyes.

“It is only one word. It is addressed to Lan SiZhui.” Since there was no way to address a messenger talisman, Lan SiZhui doubted this, but still, he nodded and listened. “It says: ‘Prepare’.” Lan SiZhui looked at Lan WangJi and understood. Their time was up, the Sects were coming for them.

“Ah?” Wei WuXian frowned, leaning over. “Lan Zhan, is that all it says? How cryptic! How are we supposed to know what it means?”

In the crowd, Lan SiZhui caught Wen Qing’s gaze, who rolled her eyes at Wei WuXian’s words. “Wei WuXian, this is no game. Quit playing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, big sister. It is a cryptic message after all.” Wei WuXian grinned at Wen Qing, then shifted his gaze and winked at Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together; he appreciated that Wei WuXian wanted to take this lightly; however, they did need to prepare.

“Brother Wei, Hanguang-Jun. Thank you for spending the last few days with us, but you really shouldn’t get involved with this. Perhaps you should go back to YiLing so they don’t find you here as well.”

“Lan SiZhui, do you think we’ve stayed here to help you build houses and wash your laundry?” Wei WuXian frowned at him and Lan SiZhui returned it. At this, Wei WuXian sighed and his expression softened. “SiZhui, how many times do I have to tell you? You’re my sworn brother. Naturally, I’m going to help you.”

“Brother Wei, it wasn’t a real ceremony.” Lan SiZhui protested. Wei WuXian rolled his eyes.

“Why does everyone bring this up as if it matters? Lan SiZhui, does it really matter if we made our oaths in a temple or under the stars? If we burned our names or not? To me it doesn’t matter. Once I swore I will act righteous, even if it means going against those I love. Did you not take the same oath with me? Did you not drink to it?”

Lan SiZhui sighed. “Brother Wei, making a drunken oath and acting on it are two different things.”

“Who said I was drunk?! Besides, I don’t make a promise I don’t intend to keep. I might not be able to, but I intend on doing right by us.” He looked at Lan SiZhui seriously. “The truth is, Lan SiZhui, whether you want me to help you or not, I will. You cannot do anything to change this anymore.”

Lan SiZhui frowned. His plans for this were different. He hoped to use some tricks he’d learned in the future to change it. Now if Wei WuXian or Lan WangJi learned about this, they would surely both think he was too corrupted to be trusted. Once again, his friends’ loyalty was chaining his hands – not that he minded it. He wasn’t fond of his own ideas, though ever since he’d been forced to use demonic cultivation, he found he came up with these crooked plans more and more often and it bothered him less and less. How disappointed the future Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi would be in him if they knew about this!

But now they were not in the future but in the past and Lan SiZhui could not let himself think of his future family. He had to think of the current situation and how to solve it.

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded, turning towards the Wen. “Take everyone inside the cave. Hide A-Yuan, Granny and Wen Ning. No matter what, the Sects cannot find them.”

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, I can help! I don’t need to hide!” Wen Ning spoke up from next to him. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Please do not argue with me about this.”

“Ah, Lan SiZhui...” He looked over at his sister, clueless as to what to do now, but at her look he quieted. For once, when Wen Qing turned to Lan SiZhui there was approval in her gaze.

“What is your plan?” Wei WuXian asked.

“I will try to talk to them.” He said. At this, Wei WuXian cocked an eyebrow and Lan SiZhui sighed. “If that doesn’t work, I have another plan. For now, I’d like to resort to that only if necessary. Brother Wei, remember, they are not our enemies but our families.”

“I know that.” Wei WuXian frowned. “But so are the Wen your family.”

“That’s why I’m hoping we can settle this peacefully.”

“Alright.” Wei WuXian nodded. “We are standing by you.”



“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him, reminded of the time when in this same place Wei WuXian declared there were only two groups: him and Lan WangJi against everyone else. It was strange to think this only happened a year ago for Lan SiZhui.

Unexpectedly, a Wen stepped forward addressing and bowing to Lan SiZhui, who felt embarrassed by this. Even though he told the Wen not to call him so formally and not to bow to him, they still insisted. “Young Master Lan. We know that our protection brings you great troubles. For this reason, please, do not fight on our behalf.”

“Ah, don’t worry.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him. “I also don’t want to fight. I will do everything in my power to avoid doing so.” The Wen made a face that told Lan SiZhui this wasn’t what he meant.

“Lan SiZhui, you don’t have to fight our battles for us.” Wen Qing said. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“This is not your battle. It is mine.” He looked around the Wen and addressed them all. “Even though I didn’t grow up amongst you, I’m still from the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect. You’re saying I’m fighting your battle for you and that I should not fight on your behalf, but I’m actually acting selfishly. You are also my family and it is my duty to protect you.”

This seemed to settle the Wen and a few more bowed to Lan SiZhui before beginning to move towards the cave. Lan SiZhui looked over at Wen Qing, hoping he didn’t overstep, but she did not seem mad, only thoughtful. As soon as she saw Lan SiZhui watching her, she turned to the Wen.

“Alright. Everyone heard Lan SiZhui. Go to the cave and hide.”

“Sister, are you sure I cannot help?” Wen Ning stepped forward, asking worriedly. Wen Qing sighed, stepping over to him and petting his hair gently.

“A-Ning, even Lan SiZhui doesn’t want you outside. Why are you arguing? Do as he says.” Wen Ning looked over at Lan SiZhui, silently asking if he was sure. Lan SiZhui smiled at him and nodded, encouraging Wen Ning to go. The boy’s shoulders dropped, but in the end he bowed his head and nodded, heading towards the cave as well. “How much time do we have?” Wen Qing asked, turning to Lan SiZhui.

“These messengers are short-range. Brother is likely within a half-an-hour distance.” Lan WangJi answered instead of Lan SiZhui. He nodded, confirming this when Wen Qing looked to him.

“That is not a lot of time to prepare.” She frowned. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“There is not a lot of us. Anything we might want to oppose the Sects with we would need to do in the moment, so there’s no need to prepare for this.”

“Still. The people inside the caves will need protection.”

“Mn. Do we still have some of Lan JingYi’s talismans?”

“Which one? You’ve used up all our Graveyard-Purging talismans in the beginning.”

“Here.” Lan WangJi unexpectedly said, pulling some talismans from his sleeves and handing them over to Wen Qing. Lan SiZhui took one look at the Graveyard-Purging talisman and pressed his lips together. If he had to summon large amounts of resentful energy, these might not work. However, he wasn’t sure how to make them more powerful. Even as they were, they were high-grade talismans that combined a talisman and a ward. Lan SiZhui was a good student, but he was not a talisman artist, not like Lan JingYi... or Wei WuXian!

“Ah, Brother Wei, can I ask a favor?”

“Anything.” Wei WuXian nodded, stepping forward as if ready to lend a hand right away.

“These Graveyard-Purging talismans are Lan JingYi’s craft.” At this, Wei WuXian’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t comment. “They combine the spirit-repelling talisman and the cleansing ward. Ah, here.” He swept his feet over the dirt on the ground between them and crouched down to draw into it with his finger. Wei WuXian followed his example without hesitation or consideration of his expensive clothes. “These are the ones I’ve talked about. We used this stroke and this from the talisman and this one and this one from the ward. We combined it this way to create the talisman.”

“Lan SiZhui, why have you never told me you were also an inventor? We would have had something interesting to talk about instead of attending the boring lectures in Cloud Recesses.” Wei WuXian smirked at him in mischief. However, the next moment, he yelped, having received a gentle kick from Wen Qing.

“Watch your mouth, Wei WuXian. Lan WangJi is standing right here.”

“Ah, big sister, Lan Zhan doesn’t mind! He secretly thinks the same thing, but he’s too polite to say so. Isn’t that right, Lan Zhan?” He grinned up at the other. Lan WangJi’s gaze, if it was directed at anyone else would mean severe punishment. However, he just looked away, his jaw clenching, not commenting, not agreeing or disagreeing. This made Lan SiZhui wonder if Wei WuXian was right or not.

“Concentrate.” Wen Qing barked at him. Wei WuXian huffed in amusement but turned back to Lan SiZhui.

“I’m sure you’re not telling this to me just to boast about your achievement. What is it?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “The credit is not mine. I simply pointed out mistakes in Lan JingYi’s design. Jin Ling and him were the ones who did the research.”

“Lan SiZhui.” Wen Qing barked at him and Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, bowing his head. She was right, of course. Lan SiZhui might’ve wanted to impress Wei WuXian just a little, just so he could bask in the approval of his former adoptive father again. This was not the time for that.

“Brother Wei, while the talisman is powerful and high-grade, it had proved in the past that against the Burial Mounds’ energies, it is a little insufficient. Unless being powered by large

amounts of spiritual energy it cannot withhold against it for longer than fifteen minutes, and even then, it lets smaller amounts of resentful energy through. I do not think this will be necessary, but preparing for the worst, we would need to seal off the cave to make sure the Wen would be safe from this flood of resentful energy. Since I'm not talented in the art of talismans and wards, would you be able to help me come up with a way to do this?"

For a long time Wei WuXian was quiet, studying Lan SiZhui's drawings in the dirt. He grimaced and scratched at his head under his ponytail. Then he looked over at the cave, squinting his eyes even though the weather was gloomy as usual.

"Ah, there's a magic circle inside there, isn't there?" He finally asked. Lan SiZhui nodded.

"However, once it is broken, it takes a lot of spiritual energy to repair."

"Do you know what kind of ward it is?"

"I've seen it working once fully and a few times with a small amount of spiritual energy." Lan SiZhui said. "It looks unique and nothing like what I've come across in my studies."

"I need to take a look. Whatever I come up with regarding the Graveyard-Purging talisman, the magic circle's energies might corrupt it. I need to make sure it is not malicious."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, not wanting to comment on something he didn't know much about.

It turned out that the examination of the circle took up most of their remaining time. Wei WuXian asked every Wen who was inside to move to the sides, so they stood in a circle around Wei WuXian while he sketched on a piece of paper, making notes here and there.

"Was it wise to ask him to do this?" Wen Qing asked next to Lan SiZhui. The two of them sat on the stairs leading inside, Wen Qing leaning against one of the pillars. Lan SiZhui was just about to answer, but Lan WangJi beat him to it.

"Wei Ying is smart. He will figure it out." He was sitting on the top of the stairs behind them in Lotus position, his eyes closed.

"I'm sure he will." She answered. "But by your own predictions the Sect could be here at any moment. We might not have time for him to 'figure it out'."

"Ah, I've got it!" Wei WuXian chose this moment to jump on his feet, raising his arm and waving towards where Lan SiZhui and Wen Qing were sitting, as if they had not been watching him tensely for the past ten minutes.

"As expected from Wei Ying." Lan WangJi said with what Lan SiZhui realized was smugness in his voice as he stood and walked down to stand next to Wei WuXian. Lan SiZhui and Wen Qing shared a look, but they also joined.

"Ah, Lan SiZhui, this was not an easy task!" He grinned, though he looked just as proud as Lan WangJi was of him moments ago, standing with his hands on his hips. "Lan SiZhui, do you know what this magic circle is?" He did not wait for an answer. "It is no wonder you had

no idea.” He grinned at Lan SiZhui as if they shared a joke. “Ah, let me tell you. This was most likely where Xue ChongHai had forged his resentful spiritual tool, the Yin Iron!” He paused for effect, but then continued. “Ah, you must be asking now: ‘But if this is where the most powerful resentful tool was formed, how come it can actually repel resentful energy?’ The answer is easy. It cannot.”

“But when we were here with Lan JingYi and Jin Ling we have activated it and it worked like it could.”

“Ah, that’s the tricky part. Lan SiZhui, you said before you’ve seen it work, once fully and a few times with a small amount of spiritual energy. Tell me, SiZhui, that few times you’ve seen it work with small amount of energy, how was it activated?”

“I believe we’ve activated it by forming an evil-suppressing array.”

“Ah, this explains it.” Wei WuXian nodded. “This array was originally an evil-repelling array. However, someone had modified it to draw resentful energy here instead of repelling it. It is a good thing you didn’t use a lot of spiritual energy to activate it, or else the array would’ve worked the opposite way and would’ve drawn in so much resentful energy you would’ve died in the same breath. However, this theory goes against you stating you’ve seen it working fully. Can you tell me more about that time?”

Lan SiZhui hesitated. When he revealed this to Wei WuXian, he didn’t actually think he would ask about this. He was talking about the time they were stuck here because of Su She. Now that he heard this from Wei WuXian, he wondered how it could be that the array worked the opposite way. But then he realized at the time Grandmaster Lan also didn’t have his spiritual powers! So, how did he activate it and repair it?

“The person activating it had just temporarily lost his spiritual powers. However, he drew his blood and cast a spell I believe to repair the circle.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian nodded. “This aligns with one of my theories that this stroke is for detecting intent. The user would need to have a protecting or malicious intent before activating this ward. This stroke here makes it possible to be used without spiritual powers, but since every cultivation array was designed to be activated by spiritual energy, if used this way, it is not very powerful, though it is enough to keep resentful energy away or inside for a short while.”

“Wei WuXian, I’m sure this is all fascinating, but we’re running out of time. Get to the point.” Wen Qing said with an annoyed sigh.

Wei WuXian pressed his lips together and bowed his head, nodding.

“Alright. The point is that by adding two additional strokes, the array would be only to protect those inside it against the resentful energy and it would work as a ward would, so a cultivator would need to activate it, then the array will be only as powerful as the cultivator and if the cultivator died, the array would also stop working.”

“I will activate the array.” Lan WangJi said with a final tone.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, I can also activate it!” Wei WuXian protested.

“I don’t care who does it.” Wen Qing snapped. “Just do it!”

“Ah, fine.” Wei WuXian huffed, then leaned down and nicked his thumb before drawing over the array with his blood. He drew the two additional strokes carefully, consulting with his notes. Once he was done, he straightened and nodded to Lan WangJi. The other also nicked his finger on Bichen, then closed his eyes and activated the array masterfully. The magic circle lit up so bright Lan SiZhui had to cover his eyes for a moment, then the light faded, though not completely.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, I thought the Lan weren’t supposed to be showing off their talents.” Wei WuXian pouted. Lan WangJi ignored him, turning to the Wen.

“Only inside the circle is safe. Please, stay here.”

“Ah, Hanguang-Jun, thank you!” One of them called out, then the Wen shuffled inside the circle.

“We should go outside.” Lan SiZhui said, looking towards the entrance of the cave. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he sensed something in the energies of the Burial Mounds change. He was fairly certain the Sects had arrived.

“Alright. Let’s go.” Wei WuXian agreed. The three of them headed towards the entrance when they noticed Wen Qing following them. Lan SiZhui paused and looked back at her.

“Wen Qing, please, stay here.”

“Lan SiZhui, you’re going to decide about the fate of my family and Clan and you think I would stay here and bow to you?” She raised her eyebrows. Lan SiZhui looked over the Wen then at Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi.

“Go ahead. I’ll be right out.” He told the latter. Wei WuXian nodded and hurried ahead, Lan WangJi following silently. Lan SiZhui turned back to Wen Qing. “When I said I want to protect my family, this also involved you.”

“I’m the leader of my Clan, Lan SiZhui. If you think I’ll just stay here and cower in fear, you’re delusional.”

“I don’t think staying here is cowering in fear. In fact, I think this is the smart thing to do. The Sects are hard to convince as it is. If they see a Wen by our side, they will be hard to persuade.”

“Well then, sorry for making your job harder. But Lan SiZhui, this whole situation is about us. Don’t you think there should be someone representing the Wen out there?” Before Lan SiZhui could protest that he was also a Wen, she cut him off. “Someone who wears the Wen name without shame?”

“I’m not ashamed of my heritage.” Lan SiZhui frowned. Wen Qing pressed her lips together.

“You might not be, but clearly, you’re the child of many heritages. You were raised by the Lan, which is why you do not know us as well as I do.” Lan SiZhui sighed, looking over at the Wen again. They were looking at the two of them curiously. Lan SiZhui didn’t expect to win this fight and the Sects got closer with every second they wasted inside. Finally, he gave in.

“Stay behind me at all times. Do you have some of the talismans Hanguang-Jun brought?”

“Yes.” She glared at him. Lan SiZhui ignored it and nodded.

“Good. If the time calls for it, use it.” With this, Lan SiZhui inclined his head towards the Wen and turned to head outside, Wen Qing following him. As soon as he joined the other two outside, Wei WuXian glanced back at Wen Qing.

“Ah, big sister, did you bully Lan SiZhui into letting you come? Don’t be so hard on him. He just wants to look out for you.”

“Concentrate, Wei WuXian.” She glared at him and Wei WuXian chuckled, turning back towards where the first person already appeared on the horizon. His amusement lasted only as long as he saw the amount of people hurrying towards them.

Lan SiZhui wished Lan JingYi and Jin Ling were also here with them, so he could rely on them as well. Even though him and his adoptive fathers had a good relationship now, they didn’t know each other in combat as well as they could. During the Sunshot Campaign they didn’t work much together, and even then Lan SiZhui had his spiritual powers, so it was different than the current situation.

Soon they saw the cultivators. They arrived via swords, directing them towards the cave. This was a scary view from where Lan SiZhui stood. He looked over, seeing the others looking much less affected by this than him. Wei WuXian was looking at the sky with his head tilted to the side as if he was bored. Lan WangJi was looking up expectantly, as if he was awaiting his disciples from a night-hunt, expecting a report as soon as they landed. Only when he looked slightly behind him did he see something similar to what he felt. Wen Qing tried to put on a brave and unaffected expression, but her worry still broke through the mask, making her whole appearance tense and ready to flee. However, she stood sure and not a muscle moved to run away.

Lan SiZhui turned back towards where the first cultivators began to land. He took deep breaths, trying to mentally prepare for the upcoming argument and possibly fight. He desperately hoped they would be able to convince the Sects to leave them alone, but from past experiences and also knowing their relationship with the Wen, Lan SiZhui had low expectations. The Sects might listen to them, but they would not allow this.

As they arrived, Lan SiZhui saw several familiar faces in the crowd. Lan JingYi was here, standing next to Lan XiChen. On Jiang FengMian’s side was his son and wife, which surprised Lan SiZhui. Nie MingJue also came, though he didn’t bring his brother with him this time. Jin ZiXun also came, though Lan SiZhui could see neither Jin ZiXuan, nor Jin Ling. He also didn’t see Jin GuangYao, which didn’t surprise him, though it did make him

wonder. Su She was also here as well as Sect Leader Yao and several smaller Clan and Sect Leaders.

They came into a group in front of them and Lan SiZhui had a feeling of this having happened before. As he exchanged a look with Lan JingYi, he saw the other also remembering this. This was almost the same way the Sects had come when the juniors had been abducted by the masked men and tied up in the Burial Mounds, to be found later by Wei WuXian and then the Sects. At the time he was standing on the other side, rushing to his peers and his Grandmaster.

Back then, Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi stood as one group against the four Sects as the other. Now the situation wasn't all that different. Lan SiZhui looked over the people facing them. They all looked determined. All of them had their swords in their hands, but not many sheathed it after landing.

"Young Master Wei, Hanguang-Jun, what are you doing here?!" Someone from the crowd called out. Lan WangJi shifted his gaze towards them, but he didn't answer.

"Wei WuXian, get over here!" Jiang Cheng called out, glaring at his brother. "What are you doing?"

"Ah, Jiang Cheng." Wei WuXian smiled at him. "Don't worry. I'll just stay here."

"Stop this nonsense. Can't you see what's happening?" Jiang Cheng looked him up and down. "And look at you! It's like you've been rolling around in the dirt. Is that how you represent our Sect?"

"A-Cheng." Jiang FengMian placed a hand on his son's shoulder, which quieted Jiang Cheng. He looked over at his parents. Jiang FengMian watched Wei WuXian calmly, but next to him Madam Yu looked less than pleased.

"So, now you're allying yourself with the Wen dogs? Is that how low you've sunk, Wei WuXian?!" She glared at him. Wei WuXian pressed his lips together and shifted on his feet. He then bowed to Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu.

"Uncle Jiang, Madam Yu, sorry for disappearing like this."

"Somehow I suspected you were with Wen SiZhui. After all, he's just like you." Madam Yu spit out. Wei WuXian looked away.

"My Lady, that's enough. We don't know the situation yet." Jiang FengMian said. Madam Yu turned to him, scoffing.

"We don't know the situation?! Sect Leader Jiang, you've known the situation since the Sunshot Campaign. Are you still denying it?"

"Enough." Jiang FengMian repeated, a little more forcefully this time.

"WangJi." Lan XiChen took the word and they all shifted their attention to the brothers. "Is everything alright?"

“Mn.” Lan WangJi inclined his head. Lan XiChen nodded in acknowledgement, glancing at Lan JingYi before turning to Lan SiZhui.

“SiZhui, it is good to see you. I hope the past few weeks had treated you well.”

“As expected, Sect Leader Lan.” Lan SiZhui answered, bowing to the Sect Leader.

“And what is expected?” Jin ZiXun asked, stepping forward. “Lan SiZhui, weren’t you the one to break the Wen out of their prison and take them here?” This made people call out, some arguing, some agreeing. Lan SiZhui looked over them, then turned to Jin ZiXun and nodded.

“Young Master Jin is right. It was indeed me who had freed the Wen.”

“So, you admit it?!” Jin ZiXun’s eyes widened. He pointed at Lan SiZhui and turned to address the crowd. “You’ve heard him! The tyrant admitted himself!”

“Young Master Jin, isn’t this a little too much?” Lan XiChen furrowed his brows, but he didn’t even turn towards Jin ZiXun to address him. “Lan SiZhui merely freed the Wen. He could hardly be called ‘tyrant’.”

“Sect Leader Lan, tell me then,” Jin ZiXun stepped closer to Lan XiChen, looking at his profile challengingly, “how long is it until Lan SiZhui turns into the next Wen RuoHan? After all,” he turned back to the crowd, “we’ve all seen what he did in Nightless City! We’ve all heard Wen Chao! Everyone is so ready to forget and dismiss those accusations, which is why we should pay even more attention to them! Wen Chao said Lan SiZhui worked with the Wen during the war. How else would he and Wen ZhuLiu have gotten out of the Cloud Recesses? How else would Lan SiZhui have learned demonic cultivation if not from his uncle, Wen RuoHan?!”

“Jin ZiXun, you keep bringing this up, however, that you’re more inclined to believe Wen Chao than XiChen when he says Lan SiZhui’s actions were approved by him and his techniques, be it traditional or unorthodox, come from the Lan Sect, it tells me much more about you than your words say about Lan SiZhui.” Nie MingJue spoke up unexpectedly.

“What do you mean by that?!” Jin ZiXun asked angrily. He quickly noticed his mistake by snapping at a Sect Leader, but he didn’t back down.

“Since when are Wen Chao’s, your enemy’s words more reliable than Lan XiChen’s, an established and righteous Sect Leader’s?” He raised arrogant eyebrows.

“Sect Leader Nie, are you against us in this?” Jin ZiXun asked accusingly. Nie MingJue huffed, though his hand gripped Baxia tighter.

“Do I agree that the Wen’s place is in the prison? Yes. However, you’re spouting nonsense.” He glared. “Either talk about relevant things or do not talk at all.”

“Sect Leader Nie is right.” Lan XiChen said. “This topic had been closed after the Sunshot Campaign concluded. Why bring it up now?”



“Sect Leader Lan, Sect Leader Nie, you’re so ready to defend Lan SiZhui, however, this topic had not been closed. It was only you who decided it didn’t matter and moved on. But we must not forget the truth to these words. Wen Chao might’ve been the one who said it, but doesn’t it make sense?”

“These are things I believe Young Master Jin had no glance into during the Sunshot Campaign, so I do not fault him for this.” Lan XiChen said. “The truth is, this matter is indeed closed. Young Master Jin, if you recall, me and MingJue spent a lot of time talking to Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling in private. When we secluded ourselves like this, we have done so to talk about these things. This is why you might not know the extent I knew about Lan SiZhui’s methods and motivations in this war. However, since you do not know about these things, it would be wiser to accept our word and keep quiet.”

“Sect Leader Lan, do not think I’m so stupid. Naturally I know that there are things Sect Leaders prefer to keep to themselves for the sake of leading the Sects better. However, this issue is beyond the confines of the tactical tent in the war. Do you not think we have the right to question these things?”

“Young Master Jin, frankly, this is none of your business.” Lan XiChen said, finally turning towards Jin ZiXun. Lan SiZhui could see that this also alarmed Jin GuangShan and sure enough, the Sect Leader stepped in right away.

“ZiXun, that’s enough. If ZeWu-Jun says this is the Lan’s business, we have no choice but to leave it alone.” He paused, then turned to Lan XiChen. “ZeWu-Jun, excuse my nephew. He is too young to understand these diplomatic matters.”

“How many times can they give this excuse?” Wei WuXian muttered under his breath, so only the four of them heard. “He isn’t younger than me and I still understand these things. One would think they might start saying he is too dense to understand, not that he’s too young.”

“Wei WuXian, shut up.” Wen Qing hissed back, voice wavering, though there was amusement in her tone.

“We are not here for this, anyways.” Jin GuangShan said once Lan XiChen inclined his head, accepting the apology. “ChunYu-Jun, what is the meaning of this?” He turned to Lan SiZhui, adjusting his sleeves. “Didn’t we agree to hold a fair trial for these Wen? Why did you rebel and took them away from Qiongqi path to bring them here, where we cannot even enter without a Graveyard-Purging talisman?” He gestured around. Nobody pointed out that they didn’t actually need the talismans. “ChunYu-Jun, I wanted to handle this matter discreetly and between ourselves, but you brought this to the attention of the whole cultivation world and they’re now questioning my and your Sect Leader’s capabilities. Surely, this was not what you wanted, so please, explain yourself!”

Lan SiZhui looked around, taking in the faces turning towards him in expectation of an explanation. Lan SiZhui was never good at speeches and he didn’t like to talk in front of big crowds. However, he had no choice now. He took a deep breath and collected his thoughts, answering as politely as he could.

“Sect Leader Jin, please do not misunderstand me, I never meant any offense towards the Jin Sect. I would not be so bold as to question your intentions. However, Sect Leader Jin, please understand my point of view as well. The reality is that nobody in the four Sects wants to see the Wen walk free, whether they actually committed a crime or not.”

“ChunYu-Jun, you’re saying you mean no offense and that you don’t want to question my intentions, however, your words and actions prove the opposite.” Jin GuangShan shook his head as a disappointed grandfather. “Like this, how can I convince the others of your good will?” There was a pause where Lan SiZhui was quiet, not knowing how to answer this.

“Sect Leader Jin, say this instead,” Wei WuXian began next to Lan WangJi, stepping forward, “you told Lan SiZhui that the Wen you’ve taken from Dafan Mountain were kept in good conditions. However, when we found them, they were worked and abused by the prison guards. Lan SiZhui is not only a Lan, but also a very compassionate person. That he freed the Wen was not a malicious act, but a compassionate one instead.”

“And who should we be compassionate towards, Wei WuXian?” Madam Yu asked, glaring at him. “The Wen who had killed your disciple mates? Your juniors and teachers?”

“It is true that the Wen killed many of us, but those Wen were not these ones.” Wei WuXian said, his face pinched in hurt.

“Does it matter what breed the dog is, as long as it bites people, it’s just a dog.” Madam Yu huffed.

“Madam Yu, if your family killed someone while you weren’t even there, then those who want revenge would come for you and punish you for the crimes your family had committed, what would you feel?” Wei WuXian asked, visibly bracing himself. “Would you feel injustice? Or would you feel like you deserved the punishment, just because you’re related to those people?”

“Do not talk to me like you know me, Wei WuXian!” She glared at him sharply, Zidian sparkling on her hand. Lan SiZhui looked between the two. Surely, Madam Yu would not hurt Wei WuXian?

“Wei WuXian, if someone was to blame me for my family’s crimes I’d beg on my knees to punish me!” Someone said from the crowd. Wei WuXian rolled his eyes.

“Naturally, you would if I was trying to prove the opposite.” He said.

“Young Master Wei, with all due respect, what is this supposed to prove?” Jin GuangShan asked. Wei WuXian paused, then turned to him.

“Sect Leader Jin, these Wen were not the ones who fought us during the Sunshot Campaign. Why keep them as if they were then? Do they not deserve better treatment than this?”

“They killed my men.” Jin GuangShan told him. “What treatment should they deserve?”

“Sect Leader Jin, I’ve also killed your men back then.” Lan SiZhui cut in rudely before Wei WuXian could answer. “Yet instead of sending me to the same prison Wen Qing and her family had been sent to, I was taken to Koi Tower, treated my injuries, got three meals a day and anything else I desired I just had to ask for it.” Wei WuXian stepped back, looking between him and Jin GuangShan. “While I am grateful for the treatment, I also feel this is not fair.”

“Should I have let my enemies into my home, treat their injuries and give them whatever they desired then?” Jin GuangShan spread his arms in a helpless gesture. Lan SiZhui sighed, annoyed.

“Sect Leader Jin must see the point I’m trying to make.”

“I see that you’re very desperate to help these Wen. Lan SiZhui, it’s fine. We do not wish to punish them unfairly. This is why they would have had a fair trial where their fate would’ve been decided according to what crimes they committed. Yet you did not believe this and took them away instead, putting me in this position to invade this cursed place and threaten you against my will.”

“Sect Leader Jin, please excuse my rudeness, but may I ask what would have been your ruling if these Wen were put in front of you?” Wei WuXian asked, tilting his head to the side in curiosity.

“We are not on a trial, Young Master Wei.”

“We might as well be, since we’re talking about this.” Wei WuXian said, raising his eyebrows. Jin ZiXun clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“Wei WuXian, we’re definitely not having a trial right here and right now.”

“Why not?” Wei WuXian blinked, looking around. “As I see it, everything is given to do so. We’re all here, so are the Wen. The only thing we’re missing are comfortable seats, but perhaps that’s even better that we don’t have any. Now we’re all on equal ground.” He smiled, then looked over at Jin GuangShan. “Sect Leader Jin, what do you think?”

“Young Master Wei, is it proper to have a trial in a graveyard?” Jin GuangShan asked, frowning. “Let us return to Lanling. Then we can have a trial.”

“What will ensure the Wen’s safety if we go back to Lanling?” Wei WuXian asked with a frown of his own.

“Why would they need to be safe?” Jin ZiXun snorted. “They will be killed anyways.”

“ZiXun! Quiet.” Jin GuangShan glared at him.

“Why would he need to be quiet, Sect Leader Jin?” Wei WuXian looked at him sharply. “Isn’t he just saying what the Jin Sect’s intentions are with the Wen?”

“I already said, Wei WuXian. I’m ready to forgive Lan SiZhui if he comes back to Lanling on his own.”

“Sect Leader Jin, thank you for this offer, but I’ll not go back to Lanling without making sure my birth family is safe.” Lan SiZhui answered.

“ChunYu-Jun, don’t be so stubborn!” Clan Leader Yao called out, frowning at him. “Sect Leader Jin is giving you a very generous offer. Just take it and go. These people aren’t worth your status and life.”

“To me, they are.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“Lan SiZhui.” Wen Qing called softly behind him, so he turned and looked at her. “This is the best offer you’re going to receive.” She said lowly. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together. “What are you waiting for? Accept it. We will be fine.”

Lan SiZhui hesitated. He didn’t want the Wen to go to trial, but right now this seemed to be the only peaceful option. What Lan JingYi had said was still in the back of his mind however. He could not fight the four Sects, for then he would injure people he shouldn’t and alter the future in a way he could not even imagine. This was the exact thing he protested against when they first arrived in the past. But if he played by the rules set up by the timeline, then the Wen would need to die one way or another.

When Jin Ling protested against inaction in the beginning, Lan SiZhui thought he was just the usual, stubborn, strong-willed, and most importantly, arguing him for the sake of arguing. Back then, he didn’t realize just how correct Jin Ling was. In the future Lan SiZhui had everything he ever needed. He had Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian come back from the dead. He also got to know the Ghost General as his cousin. Because of this, he never really understood Jin Ling’s motivation for changing the past.

He thought he knew the feeling of not having parents. He had always been an orphan and Hanguang-Jun never made it a secret in front of him that he was not his actual father. But at the same time him and ZeWu-Jun as well as Lan QiRen had always been by Lan SiZhui’s side. He had a family even though he wasn’t related to them. He didn’t have anyone he shared blood with and because of this, he never knew the importance of this bond. However, since arriving to the past, he had learned about his birth family and got to know them. He met his parents then they died. If they were to go back now to the point where they arrived to previously, Lan SiZhui was sure he would also advocate to save his parents as Jin Ling had done.

This realization weighted more heavily on Lan SiZhui than anything else. Because a year ago he would have watched the Wen die and would have felt sorrow, but he would have said this was the course of the events and this was how it was supposed to go. But now, standing beside Wen Qing with the Wen huddling together, afraid in that cave behind him, Lan SiZhui felt desperation like drowning to not let them die and fight for their lives.

Lan SiZhui should not fight the four Sects, just to save a family that was already long gone by the time he could even comprehend what a family was, but in his heart, Lan SiZhui knew that if it came down to it, he would. He would fight them and win, because even the thought of losing this group of people hurt more than any injury he ever suffered.

He turned back to the Sects, catching Lan XiChen's eyes. The Sect Leader was watching him closely, and after studying Lan SiZhui's face for a few seconds, he drew in a deep breath, closing his eyes as if in pain. Lan SiZhui turned to Jin GuangShan.

"Sect Leader Jin, how can you guarantee that the Wen will not come to any harm in the meantime and that the trial is going to be fair?" He asked. Madam Yu next to Jin GuangShan huffed.

"Insolent boy! Who do you think you are to question a Sect Leader's integrity?!"

"Madam Yu, let's say what we all think." Wen Qing stepped forward, glaring at the other woman. "If we leave here now and go to this trial, the Jin Sect is going to claim we've killed those people in Dafan out of malice and blame every one of us for this. They were never going to let us go, simply because we carry the name Wen. We've known this ever since the soldiers showed up in our village. Ever since we've heard the stories. People had been taken to these prisons purely because they were related to the main branch of the Wen Sect and were cultivators. We are not delusional."

"What stories are you talking about, Lady Wen?" Clan Leader Yao asked. Wen Qing frowned at him.

"There was a small clan in Ganquan, the Xiu Clan. One of the members of my Clan, Xiu Qing got news from one of his cousins that the Jin had gone to Ganquan for a night hunt.

"About three months ago, some Jin disciples were night hunting in Ganquan and chasing an Eight-Winged Bat King to a place where the Xiu Clan live. The Jin disciples couldn't catch up with the Bat King and ran into the Xiu Clan's disciples who came to see what happened. The Jin had forced them to offer themselves as live bait. They were afraid to do it, and the leader of the Clan, the cousin of someone we took into our Clan argued with the leader of this group. During the tarriance, the Bat King ran away. After this, the Xiu Clan's disciples have disappeared."

"How is this connected to the Wen at all?" Someone from the crowd asked.

"It is well-known that the Xiu Clan's ancestors were Wen. They were like us, descendants of Wen Mao. However, once the Clan Leader's wife could not birth a boy, so the Clan Leader married one of his daughters to another cultivator in the area; Xiu Liu. Since then, this Wen branch have become the Xiu Clan, and even though their name were different, they were just as related to the Wen as we are." Wen Qing explained sharply.

"But if there was a beast roaming an area, why do you think it was the Jin who took them?" Clan Leader Yao frowned.

"Sir, as I mentioned, one of ours is the cousin of the Xiu Clan Leader. I've heard of this story because at the time this incident took place he was visiting his family. He didn't go on the night-hunt because he was a guest, but this doesn't mean he didn't see and hear things."

"This is ridiculous. Why are we listening to this?" Jin ZiXun scoffed. "This woman just insulted Sect Leader Jin. Is this really how we handle the situation?"

“Would you rather fight?” Wei WuXian asked disdainfully. “Young Master Jin ZiXun, why didn’t you just say so? We can fight if you want.”

“Wei WuXian, don’t be so rampant. How dare you be so rude as you stand there with those bastards? Do you really think you are so invincible that no one dares to offend you? Do you want to overturn the heavens?” At this, Wei WuXian snorted, looking at Jin ZiXun with pity.

“Are you comparing yourself to the heavens? With all due respect, you really have thick skin.”

“You...!” Jin ZiXun glared at him, stepping forward, raising his sword. However, before he could even start threatening Wei WuXian, a bright sword glare had knocked his sword away. Jin ZiXun lost his grip on his weapon and caught his hand, looking up and around to see who had offended him.

“Jin ZiXun, even though Wei WuXian is acting so rudely, he is still the head disciple of the Jiang Sect. Raising your sword against him is like raising your sword against me.” Jiang FengMian said, glaring at Jin ZiXun. This was possibly the first time that Lan SiZhui had seen him anything less than pleasant. He thought Jin Ling previously had a bad judgement of the man’s personality and he was not as mellow as he thought.

“Sect Leader Jiang, I apologize in my nephew’s name.” Jin GuangShan said with an awkward chuckle. “You know how he is.”

“Yes.” Wei WuXian said with a dangerous tone. “I think we all know by now how he is.”

There was a pause, then Jin GuangShan turned to Lan SiZhui.

“ChunYu-Jun, you question whether I’d be impartial towards the Wen. However, I also have a question towards you.” He paused, looking around, then returned his gaze to Lan SiZhui. “I wanted to speak to you about this privately, but since you won’t budge, I’ll have to speak about this here in front of everyone. Please, forgive me. ChunYu-Jun, there is something you’ve used against my men in the Wen village. They came back reporting about a tool you had that could concentrate resentful energy.”

Here he paused, clearly waiting for an answer. Lan SiZhui stayed quiet. Jin GuangShan huffed.

“ChunYu-Jun, this is extremely similar to the Yin Iron. You used it to battle my men. It’s very powerful. Besides, it hurt some of my cultivators.” Jin GuangShan paused again, but Lan SiZhui didn’t answer this time either. Instead, Wei WuXian spoke up.

“Sect Leader Jin, please get to the point.”

“This is the point!” Jin GuangShan flicked his sleeves in annoyance. “Among the four shards of the Yin Iron, three were destroyed. One is missing. Regardless of how your tool was forged, its power is too strong for anyone to master. Such an important thing is held in your hands alone. I’m afraid...”

Again, Wei WuXian took the word from Lan SiZhui and said: “Sect Leader Jin, are you hinting at something?” There was a pause, but this time it was Jin GuangShan who failed to answer. Wei WuXian took a deep breath and continued. “All right. Please allow me to ask another question. Do you think that without the Wen Sect of Qishan, the Jin Sect is supposed to take its place naturally?”

“Wei WuXian, how dare you!” Jin ZiXun glared at him with wide eyes. Wei WuXian turned to him with a flat look.

“Young Master Jin, you’ve already insulted two Sect Leaders today. Are you sure you want to speak up?”

“You—!” Jin ZiXun’s face got red, and he stepped forwards, though this time he didn’t raise his sword.

“Enough!” Jin GuangShan snapped. “You teenagers get so angry so easily. Besides, Young Master Wei, I was not talking to you. Why are you the one answering and not ChunYu-Jun?”

“Sect Leader Jin, you’re asking him about things you don’t know about. Besides, him and I had been accused of becoming the next Wen RuoHan by your nephew. However, as I see it, by how the Jin Sect is acting, aren’t they the ones who act like the Wen? You expect everything to be handed over to you and everyone should follow your order. Is it not my right to point out the hypocrisy in this?”

“Wei WuXian, what are you talking about?” Jin ZiXun asked, sounding offended and scandalized.

“Did I say something wrong? At Nightless City, I could take what you did as revenge. But now that water is under the bridge, you still force people to be live bait. If they refuse, you beat and bully them. What’s the difference between you and Wen RuoHan?”

“A-Xian, that’s enough.” Jiang FengMian said sternly. However, before Wei WuXian could reply, Clan Leader Yao spoke up:

“Of course, it’s different. The Wen Sect does evil things. The Jin Sect might be harsh in their treatment, but isn’t that how the Wen treated us? They burned down our homes and killed our people. Look on your both side, Young Master Wei. Lan SiZhui and Lan WangJi also suffered under them. Isn’t harsh treatment what they deserve?”

Unexpectedly, Lan WangJi answered:

“We have been abused by the Wen. We led the war. Now we are here. The conclusions are clear.” He said ice coldly, and judging by his tone, it was clear he saw this matter closed. Lan SiZhui almost chuckled, but he quickly repressed the urge.

“Hanguang-Jun, what you say makes sense.” Clan Leader Yao said with a thoughtful expression, petting his beard. “However, you are also Lan. The Lan Sect’s disciples are known of their ability to forgive the dog that bit them even if it bites them again.”

“And the Wen are going to bite you again, Second Young Master Lan.” Jin ZiXun said, seemingly catching momentum from what Clan Leader Yao said. “It is in their nature. After all, they’re just filthy dogs.” He said this last part almost pityingly.

“Can a group of people be judged together? Are they not individuals?” Wei WuXian asked with a frown. “You should punish the people who wronged you. Wen Qing and Wen Ning have never gotten their hands on anything bloody.”

“It’s righteous for anyone to kill the people of the Wen Sect. Why the hell should we talk sense into them? It’s a pity that I killed too few of them in the war.” Jin ZiXun huffed arrogantly. Lan SiZhui clenched his teeth together and he saw Wei WuXian grip Chenqing.

“You’re ready to kill innocents here. Then if I kill you today, will that be justified?”

“You—!” Jin ZiXun glared scandalized, however, before he could say more, Jiang FengMian spoke up.

“That is enough, A-Xian!” He repeated almost angrily, stepping forward. “I allow you to follow your own path because I do not believe in caging my disciples. However, this is taking it too far.”

“Is it taking it too far, Sect Leader Jiang?” Wei WuXian asked, though his tone did mellow significantly and he lost some of his tension. “Jin ZiXun is threatening not only the Wen, but us as well. He said himself in the Crowd Hunt.”

“What did he say, A-Xian?” Jiang FengMian frowned. At this, Wei WuXian looked away. Madam Yu huffed and said:

“Jin ZiXun said Wei WuXian and Wen SiZhui were demonic cultivators and also said that they are the next Wen RuoHan.”

“Ah, that’s not correct!” Lan JingYi spoke up for the first time since they’ve arrived. “I believe Jin ZiXun’s words were: ‘should we fear a new Wen RuoHan to rise from the Jiang Sect’, or something like that.”

“Does the wording matter?” Clan Leader Yao asked.

“Of course, it does.” Someone from the Jiang Sect spoke up, though Lan SiZhui didn’t recognize them. “When Brother Wei said that: ‘Jin ZiXun is threatening us’, he was talking about not just himself and ChunYu-Jun, but the Jiang Sect as well, since it was the Jiang Sect who Jin ZiXun insulted on the Crowd Hunt.”

“How dare he imply threats made towards him are threats against the Sect as well?” Madam Yu glared, however, Jiang FengMian corrected her:

“Are they not, my lady? You might not like Wei WuXian and allow other Sects to insult him, but regardless of this, he is still the Jiang Sect’s head disciple. If he is threatened, his Sect will stand with him.”



“Even in this case, Sect Leader Jiang?!” Madam Yu turned to him to glare at him. To Jiang FengMian’s credit, the man stood her gaze without cowering.

“As I said earlier, we are not clear of the whole situation here. I will not make a rush judgement without hearing out the other side as well.”

“The other side?!” Madam Yu snapped. “Sect Leader Jiang, isn’t the situation clear enough?! Didn’t we lose disciples and almost our home in this war? Didn’t the Wen injure you and several of yours? Didn’t they walk our piers painted red by our own blood?! Weren’t we unable to wash it all off yet?! The reminders of what ‘other side’ you wish to listen to are etched into the wood of the home where you sleep. Do you really need more proof?!”

“I am well aware of what the Wen had done, my lady, I do not need the reminder.” Jiang FengMian answered with coldness and anger also, glaring back at her. Both Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng had their heads bowed, not looking at either of them. Lan SiZhui found this interesting, but he didn’t comment on it, not now anyways. “However, A-Xian had been in our care for the past several years. We cultivated not only his spirit and body but his morals as well. I am also mad at the Wen, but A-Xian would not act in defense of those who killed his disciple mates and almost destroyed his home.”

“Isn’t he the one who’s responsible for the whole thing anyways?!” Madam Yu seethed. “He was the one who had to defy Wen Chao and bring that vile woman into our home. He was also the one to let Wen SiZhui into our home, causing the Wen’s anger to heighten. The whole thing is his own fault, yet you’re defending him and claim he has acceptable reasons for his behavior?! Sect Leader Jiang, I’ve always known you were blind to Wei WuXian’s faults, but I never knew you were as delusional as to believe everything he says is right!”

“So, what if I want to listen to him?” Jiang FengMian countered. “Isn’t it my right to do so? After we’ve heard him out, we can still decide what to do after. But how could we act in the heat of the moment and make quick judgement when it was what caused this situation in the first place?”

“Just like expected from the Jiang Sect Leader.” Madam Yu huffed, looking away. There was an awkward, uncomfortable pause when nobody really knew what to say. However, after a few seconds, Lan XiChen spoke up.

“Even though Jin ZiXun spoke carelessly before, I believe we should focus on the real issue.”

“Sect Leader Lan, let me speak frankly.” Jin GuangShan began. When Lan XiChen turned to him curiously, Jin GuangShan continued. “This situation would be solved quickly if you also spoke up. It is clear that Lan SiZhui is not going to listen to us, but as his Sect Leader, you could change this situation.”

At this, Lan XiChen pressed his lips together and turned away from Jin GuangShan. There was a long pause where everyone waited for him to answer, however he did not. Lan SiZhui didn’t understand this. Lan XiChen was now challenged, so this should be the time to tell them Lan SiZhui was no longer part of the Sect.

“Sect Leader Lan, you refuse to say a word. I don’t know if this is because you have nothing to say or because you agree with Lan SiZhui’s actions.” Jin GuangShan said. “However, I believe you to be a reasonable person. I understand that Lan SiZhui is a respected hero of the Sunshot Campaign and he is also a disciple of the Lan Sect. Ever since I met him his character and demeanor had always been proper and respectful. However, in this question, how can he be right?”

“That’s right!” Someone from the crowd shouted. “He had hurt people with this evil tool of his and have converted to demonic cultivation.”

“Bullshit!” Wei WuXian called back. “It had been said before, but you might not have participated in the Sunshot Campaign to know this. However, it had been explained that Lan SiZhui’s methods originate from the Lan Sect’s musical cultivation.”

“Wei WuXian, I can also use my cultivation to hurt you.” Someone else spoke up. “How is that different from what Lan SiZhui is doing?”

“Then why call it demonic?” Wei WuXian scoffed. “Can’t you just say it properly?”

“It is demonic in that it uses resentful energy to fight.” The previous person argued. “Wei WuXian, don’t be purposefully dense!”

“Besides what we call it,” Jin GuangShan cut in, “he still uses this tool. It is extremely similar to the Yin Iron. There were four shards of Yin Iron. There is still one piece that had not been found. Isn’t this too much of a coincidence?”

“Lan SiZhui, answer!” Someone called out. “Is it true? Is your tool the missing shard of the Yin Iron?!”

There was a pause. Lan SiZhui hesitated for a moment, however, seeing Wei WuXian draw in a breath to talk, he decided to answer instead.

“I am not denying the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s connection to the Yin Iron.” He said trying to avoid saying a lie. “However, Sect Leader Nie can testify that...”

“When we were in Nightless City, me and Lan SiZhui fought side-by-side.” Nie MingJue spoke up, cutting off Lan SiZhui. “Once Wen Chao was dead, Lan SiZhui was injured. Just before he lost consciousness, he pulled out his qiankun pouch. Earlier, through the battle he had collected Wen RuoHan’s pieces of Yin Iron there to stop Wen RuoHan from using them. After he pulled it out, his last words to his friends were to destroy the Yin Iron shards. I did this with Baxia.”

“This doesn’t prove anything.” Clan Leader Yao frowned. “Sect Leader Nie, how do you know he didn’t take a shard before this, or even afterwards?”

“I would not know.” Nie MingJue said. “But I believe after seeing Wen RuoHan’s insanity, no one would be so stupid to want to use such a wicked tool.”

“Or he saw the power Wen RuoHan wielded by it and wanted the same for himself.” Clan Leader Yao argued and a lot of people agreed.

“That’s right!”

“Yes! This must be it!”

“He even admitted it was Yin Iron related!”

“Do you need more evidence?!”

“Let us not slander ChunYu-Jun’s name.” Jin GuangShan said, raising his voice. At this, people quieted. “After all, he is still a hero of the Sunshot Campaign and a Lan disciple. It is unbecoming to say such things about an ally.” He paused, then turned to Lan XiChen again. “Sect Leader Lan, it is not my place to tell you what to do. However, in the light of recent events, I must warn you. You are still young and sentimental. Life had not hardened you yet like us, seasoned Sect Leaders. Please, accept advice from us. You must build up authority. It is fine that the Lan Sect has rules you want to obey, but this case is also clear. Sect Leader Lan, unless you urge him to action, I’m afraid Lan SiZhui is not going to listen to us, but fight us instead.”

“Sect Leader Jin, you’re saying I’m young and sentimental, however, what you mean is that I’m young and impressionable. Even though life had not hardened me in the way you mean, I’m not stupid. I understand if someone is trying to manipulate me.” He turned cold eyes towards Jin GuangShan, who sighed at this as if disappointed, not embarrassed at being caught.

“ZeWu-Jun, I apologize for being so bold, but otherwise you would not listen. Even Sect Leader Jiang speaks up when Wei WuXian is being too much. Aren’t these actions of Lan SiZhui’s being too much? Why are you not speaking up against them then?”

There was a long pause once again. Lan SiZhui expected Lan XiChen to bring up the topic of Lan SiZhui leaving the Sect. However, Lan XiChen’s silence only stretched further, and now to the point that Lan SiZhui could not take it.

“Sect Leader Jin, there’s no point asking Sect Leader Lan this.” He began and Lan XiChen looked up sharply, however, he didn’t stop Lan SiZhui. Sensing this was something important, everyone paid attention and for a moment Lan SiZhui felt like he could not speak under so many stares. In the end, he collected himself and took a deep breath. “He cannot say anything against my actions in the way Sect Leader Jiang can. You say he should be the one to control me. However, he can no longer have a say in this.”

“How so, ChunYu-Jun?” Jin GuangShan frowned. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath.

“Because Lan SiZhui is no longer my disciple.” Lan XiChen said before he could speak and the air left Lan SiZhui’s lungs in a rush.

“What?”

“How’s that possible?”

“Did we miss ZeWu-Jun dismissing ChunYu-Jun as his disciple just now?”

Lan SiZhui could hear people murmur all around, surprised.

“ZeWu-Jun, what do you mean?” Jin GuangShan asked, the loudest voice in the rowdy crowd. “When did this happen?”

“Before Lan SiZhui left to go to the Wen village.” Lan XiChen said with an emotionless expression. There was a shocked pause. Then, Jin GuangShan’s eyes widened.

“ZeWu-Jun, I do not want to accuse you of anything. Please, be clear. Do you mean that when he injured my men in the Wen village, he had not been your disciple? Do you mean during the Crowd Hunt, he had not been your disciple? Do you mean when he acted recklessly and freed these people, he was not your disciple?”

Lan XiChen bowed his head; however, he did not deny the words. “Sect Leader Jin understands correctly.”

There was a long pause, when most people looked like they didn’t know what to say to that, looking at the person on their side, clueless. However, the stillness broke when Jin GuangShan spoke again.

“ZeWu-Jun, may I ask why have you denied this the whole time? It has been a long time since I’ve visited your Cloud Recesses, but I remember that one of the most important Lan rules was that a disciple should always tell the truth.”

There was a pause, then Lan XiChen huffed.

“Sect Leader Jin, if I wasn’t a Lan, you would have no issue with me lying. However, I can assure you, I have not lied. If you remember, I’ve never claimed Lan SiZhui was my disciple when he was not. There is no rule against letting the other assume their own conclusions based on my words.”

“I see.” Jin GuangShan said tersely. “But ZeWu-Jun, this still doesn’t explain why you didn’t make the situation clear when we talked in Koi Tower.”

“It is not my obligation to inform you about the ongoings of the internal affairs of the Lan Sect. You assumed Lan SiZhui still belonged to the Lan Sect and I let you assume.”

“I see.” Jin GuangShan said, still sounding annoyed, but it was evident from his final tone he didn’t wish to speak more about this. “However, you must understand that this revelation changes everything.”

“What exactly does this change, Sect Leader Jin?” Wei WuXian asked, his brows furrowed in confusion.

“Since Lan SiZhui has no one to answer to, who’s to say what he will do next?” Jin GuangShan questioned. “He dared to free the Wen and refuses to hand them over. If he keeps

refusing, we will have to use force to take them away. Since ZeWu-Jun no longer has power over him, who knows how he will use his tool to oppose us?”

“Sect Leader Jin, with all due respect, you’re talking about SiZhui like he is a beast who had been contained so far. Yet you didn’t even notice he had left the Lan Sect, simply because his nature is really mellow and polite.” Wei WuXian frowned. “Do you mean to tell me you feared him when he was having tea with you as well?”

“Wei WuXian, Lan SiZhui might not have a Sect Leader to answer to, but you still do.” Jiang Cheng spoke up, glaring. “Shut up and stop this nonsense.”

“A-Cheng, don’t talk to him.” Madam Yu barked. “Clearly, he has allied himself with Wen SiZhui.”

“Lan SiZhui is my friend.” Wei WuXian told her defensively. “In matters that mean a lot to him, should I not support him?”

“So, instead of standing with the family that had taken you in and sheltered, taught, fed you, subjected themselves to your whims and moods for so many years, you’re standing with a stranger you only met last summer? Wei WuXian, you really have no shame.” Madam Yu frowned, disgusted.

“Alright.” Jiang FengMian spoke up. “Let’s calm down.”

“Calm down?!” Madam Yu turned to him now. “Sect Leader Jiang, you’re not doing anything but standing there, listening to Wei WuXian dragging your Sect’s name through the mud. If you do not speak up against this, who should?”

“My lady, I understand your frustration. However, we should try avoid fighting, not provoke it.”

“And how should we do this? By talking around in circles until we grow old here?!” Madam Yu sneered. “We are not on a discussion conference, and no matter how we twist this, it is clear who is in the wrong here.”

“I agree!” Someone spoke up from the crowd. “ChunYu-Jun, you were a hero of the Sunshot Campaign, but look how low you’ve sunk since then! It is truly disappointing! Allying yourself with Wen instead of killing them, isn’t this embarrassing?”

“Embarrassing?” Wei WuXian asked back, incredulous. “Who are you?”

Tension was high in the air and Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure he could say anything at this point to settle the tempers. Perhaps at this point it would really be best if they just fought like Madam Yu said. They were talking in circles and finding no resolution to the problem.

“Wen Qing, please put on the talisman now.” He requested quietly. He sensed Wen Qing turning towards him, however he did not take his eyes off the Sects to see if she did as he asked. He was confident she did.

## Despair II.

“ChunYu-Jun, Madam Yu might be harsh in her words but she is not wrong.” Jin GuangShan said calmly. “Let us resolve this quickly. Hand over your tool and come with us to Koi Tower. There we will have a fair trial to both you and the Wen you shelter. Nobody needs to fight here today.”

“Sect Leader Jin, I’m afraid I cannot do that.” Lan SiZhui said tightly. “Not unless you give me a guarantee that the tool will be destroyed instead of used and that the Wen will remain safe in the meantime.”

“ChunYu-Jun, don’t you think this is too much?” Clan Leader Yao frowned. “Accusing a Sect Leader that he’s going to use this wicked tool instead of destroying it, demanding safety to our enemy...”

“Wen SiZhui, you have thick skin!” someone else shouted. Several others agreed with this. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, but didn’t answer.

“What is wrong with wanting to destroy the Stygian Tiger Amulet?” Wei WuXian asked with a frown of his own. “Isn’t that what Sect Leader Jin planned on doing with it?”

“Naturally I’d destroy it.” Jin GuangShan said. “However, this matter is not this simple. When ChunYu-Jun used this tool earlier, he wounded several of my men, at the Wen village and at Qionggqi path as well. These people need to be treated. Unless we know how the tool works, we might not be able to do so.”

Lan SiZhui shared a look with Lan JingYi. They both knew what the aftermath of this was. They lived through it, unlike these times, they were actually active participants of those events for the first time around as well. Xue Yang only had half of the Stygian Tiger Amulet, but he had created so many puppets, he actually eliminated a whole village and forced two renowned cultivators, innocents as well, to turn against each other.

“Unless the tool is destroyed here and now, I will not hand it over.” Lan SiZhui said strictly. This seemed to surprise not only Jin GuangShan, but Lan XiChen as well. He looked up, brows furrowed in confusion. He turned to Lan JingYi, who told him something quietly. At this, Lan XiChen’s eyes widened and he looked over at Lan SiZhui questioningly, as if asking for confirmation at whatever Lan JingYi said. Suspecting this was along the lines of his issue with handing over the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s half, Lan SiZhui nodded.

At this, Lan XiChen seemed to fall in thought. “Sect Leader Jin, are you sure the tool is needed to cure these people? After all, it has been said that this is related to the Yin Iron. Those wounded by the Yin Iron could be cured in the Cloud Recesses.”

“ZeWu-Jun, Cloud Recesses is not the only place on this earth with strong concentrated positive spiritual energy. Naturally, we have tried that.” Jin GuangShan shook his head, as if disappointed. “I’m afraid this tool’s effect is bigger than the Yin Iron’s. This is why I want to examine it.”

“ChunYu-Jun!” Someone called out from the crowd. “You have also fought in the war and felt the effects of Wen RuoHan’s Yin Iron. How can you be so cold as to refuse to hand over this tool to save others? They say you’re compassionate, but does this only extend to the Wen you’ve brought here?! These cultivators you’ve injured are your comrades and people you fought beside in the war. Do you not feel for them?!”

Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Before he could speak, however, there was a light touch on his arm. As he looked over, he saw Wei WuXian looking at him. After Wei WuXian was sure Lan SiZhui would not speak, he turned to the crowd.

“You say Lan SiZhui is not compassionate, but what you fail to mention is what those cultivators did to deserve their wounds. Lan SiZhui had been hurt by those people. Is he not allowed to take revenge?”

“Those people were only doing their job!” Jin ZiXun frowned. “What, now if any evil thing wants revenge after a night-hunt, we should just accept it because it’s their right to do so?!” He snorted, looking around to see if anyone else shared his amusement.

“Young Master Jin, are you implying that Lan SiZhui is also just an evil thing, no better than the monsters you slay on night-hunts?” Wei WuXian asked in a dangerous tone. “May I remind you he’s one of the heroes of the Sunshot Campaign? Half of you could probably thank your lives for him. How dare you stand here and throw such insults at him?”

There was a long pause after that. However, this didn’t stop Jin ZiXun.

“Wei WuXian, you always need someone more powerful to stand up for. Justify your insults by saying you were just defending them. First the Jiang Sect, now Lan SiZhui. Why do you always have to hide behind someone? Just admit your insolence and claim your temper. If Sect Leader Jiang was aware of your behavior, surely he would’ve gotten rid of you a long time ago.”

“Young Master Jin, do not speak in my name.” Jiang FengMian glared at the other, who bowed his head in mock respect.

“Excuse me Sect Leader Jiang. But since nobody from the Jiang Sect seems inclined to discipline Wei WuXian, what else can I do?”

This did not sit right with Lan SiZhui. They began with this and ended up revealing Lan SiZhui wasn’t part of the Sect anymore, just so the Sects would not blame Lan XiChen for his actions. If this went down with Wei WuXian as well, Sect Leader Jiang might not have a choice but to also kick him out of the Sect.

“Young Master Jin, I’ve overlooked your insults so far, but do not cross the line.” Jiang FengMian said with a dangerous tone.

“Sect Leader Jiang, he is wrong to address you like that, but isn’t he correct?” Someone asked. At this, Madam Yu huffed but she didn’t comment on it. Jiang FengMian frowned.

“I have still not heard anything worth punishing Wei Ying for.” Jiang FengMian said. “Or is it wrong of him to be loyal?”

“Yes, if he is being loyal to the wrong people.” Madam Yu said, annoyed.

“It’s just his nature!” Jiang Cheng suddenly blurted out, stepping forward and turning to face his parents. “He doesn’t mean it! Don’t punish him for it!”

“A-Xian is not being punished, A-Cheng.” Jiang FengMian said placatingly.

“How typical.” Madam Yu scoffed, turning her head away from them. Nobody asked what she meant and she didn’t say. There was an awkward pause, when Jiang Cheng turned around to look at Wei WuXian pleadingly.

Tension was high in the courtyard where they stood. Lan SiZhui was not sure how long it could rise until someone snapped and began to fight. He wanted to avoid that, but seeing the situation, he was not sure they would have a choice. He glanced over at Wen Qing and saw that she had listened to him, though she tried to be discreet, having applied the talisman under her outer robes. They shared a look and Wen Qing pressed her lips together in a dissatisfied way. Lan SiZhui sighed and turned back to the others, though he loosened the strings to his qiankun pouch.

When he had settled the resentful energy in the Burial Mounds, he thought about this situation and how he would be able to unleash all that energy at once if he needed it. He had experimented with this a little bit, but for the lack of opportunity, he was not sure if the time came he would be able to awaken the Burial Mounds with only one note. There was a chance he would need to call it forth the traditional way and that might take some time. Until then, someone else needed to fight to give him opportunity.

He glanced over at Lan JingYi, who was looking at him with a worried expression and with longing, as if he wanted to go to Lan SiZhui’s side but something stopped him. Lan SiZhui didn’t mind this. It was probably Lan XiChen or Jin Ling who told him to stay put and he was thankful for that. However now he wouldn’t mind being able to talk to him. He looked around, seeing everyone in different moods. Many were angry, while some seemed uncomfortable.

Finally, the silence broke as Jin GuangShan sighed and stepped forward, bowing his head and shaking it slowly like he was disappointed.

“ChunYu-Jun, we’ve given you enough time to consider. If you still refuse to hand over the Wen and your tool, I’m afraid I’ll have no other choice but to take it from you with force. Since we’ve become friends, naturally I do not wish to do this. But if you give me no other choice, I will have to.”

There was a pause, clearly waiting for Lan SiZhui’s answer. He hesitated for a moment, not because he considered this, but because he considered his next actions. Maybe he should just let this go and let the Wen die. After all, they were already dead in the future, so it would not harm the course of events. However, Lan SiZhui was afraid, it would harm him. Letting the Wen die was unfortunately not an option he wished to consider. If he was a good disciple of



the Lan Sect, he would. If he was not foolish, he would. However, he was not a Lan disciple anymore and not one person told him he was naïve.

He closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and turned to Jin GuangShan. “Sect Leader Jin, I’m sorry but I cannot do either. I hope you understand.” He said with a bow. At this, Jin GuangShan nodded slowly, his gaze hardening.

“ChunYu-Jun, I’ve looked on you as a friend and a student. It is really disappointing that you’ve decided to go down the wicked path. I’m afraid then I’ll have to act.” Lan SiZhui saw Lan XiChen frown and furrow his brows, as if wishing this was not happening. Lan SiZhui felt the same. Jiang FengMian was just looking at the ground while Nie MingJue was watching Lan SiZhui with furrowed brows also. Lan SiZhui smiled at him, small and barely there. Nie MingJue’s eyes narrowed. Jin GuangShan turned his head, just enough to talk to his people. “End this madness already.” He ordered.

At this, there was a pause, then the first person to step forward was Jin ZiXun. He looked at Lan SiZhui with satisfaction and arrogance. He smirked at him.

“I’ll gladly end his madness, Uncle.” He said, then turned away from Lan SiZhui to call behind him: “You heard your Sect Leader!”

While he was not looking though, Lan SiZhui wasn’t slacking either. He called forth Hudie with a swipe of his hand and with a twirl, he was in a sitting position, playing the note he hoped would call the resentful energy forth. For a moment, nothing happened, then as if a flood, suddenly the resentful energy rose around them. Lan SiZhui felt as if he just dropped a weight he didn’t even notice he carried, and he could breathe easier. Black, ink-like smoke swirled around them violently.

Lan SiZhui closed his eyes and concentrated on his own control. Since he didn’t have any spiritual energies, he had been affected by the resentful energy more and more, ever since he’d used this method in the Wen village. He felt its power now more than ever. Even when he was stuck in the Burial Mounds for months because of Wen Chao had he not felt this affected by the negative energy around him, and it took a moment for him to orient himself.

When he opened his eyes, he sensed that the situation had stabilized. The cultivators had put on Graveyard-Purging talismans, some even opting to hop on their swords to get away from the energy. Lan SiZhui did not stop playing, intensifying the energy around them. He needed to be very conscious of how much he raised the temper of the spirits, because he could not do both, play his war song and protect those with him as well. However, this was enough to drive at least some cultivators away, which was better than to harm them.

“Wen Qing, go back to the magic circle.” Lan SiZhui told her quietly.

“If you think—”

“You’re of no help here. In fact, you’re hindering us. Your people must be scared. You should be with them and calm them down until we deal with the situation.”

There was a pause, then a huff behind him. “Fine.” She said, then without any further parting words, she left. Lan SiZhui waited until he suspected she got away, then looked over at Wei WuXian, seeing him gripping both his sword and flute, as if unsure what to do.

“Brother Wei!” Lan SiZhui called out to him and Wei WuXian looked over, alert.

“What do you need me to do?” Wei WuXian asked. Lan WangJi gripped his arm.

“Wei Ying.” He hissed. However, Wei WuXian didn’t pay attention.

“I have a plan to stop them without seriously harm them. For this, I’ll need to play a different tune.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian nodded. At this moment, someone from the remaining crowd called out:

“ChunYu-Jun, do you think you can confuse us with such petty tricks?!”

“Wei WuXian!” Jiang Cheng called out. “Stop this nonsense!” Wei WuXian glanced over his family, then over at the cave. His expression hardened and he lowered his eyes pulling out his flute from his sash. “Wei WuXian!” Jiang Cheng cried, this time with more anger than desperation.

“It is useless, A-Cheng.” Madam Yu sneered. “Wei WuXian had decided where his loyalties lay, and it is not with us.”

There was no answer from Wei WuXian as he began playing. For a short while they played together, then, once Lan SiZhui was confident that Wei WuXian knew the tune, he began playing another song, one to call forth fierce corpses. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the energies around him, on the score and the will to control the corpses. Because of this, he didn’t notice a disciple deciding to risk it and run towards them until he heard a cry. Before he could reach them, a smaller wave of pure blue spiritual energy stopped him.

Lan SiZhui glanced over and saw Lan WangJi glaring at the other person. However, he didn’t have time to dwell on it, for the person attacking him was only the first of many. Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened as he looked past the fog in front of him and saw the five Sects’ army charging at them.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said from next to him, pulling out his sword and looking over at Lan WangJi, “let’s fight.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded, sparing one glance at Lan SiZhui before him and Wei WuXian threw themselves into the battle.

They were vastly outnumbered. There was not a lot of people fighting for Lan SiZhui and he was afraid, even if they were exceptional swordsmen, they would not hold out for long. He needed to do something about the situation and quickly. He hesitated. Raising the fierce corpses would help, but it wouldn’t stop the cultivators from advancing on them. He could play the song that would take away their spiritual energies, but by this, he would also stop them from being able to defend themselves against the fierce corpses. Also, this was a highly

untested theory, since he didn't know the score exactly, and the one he came up with could be inaccurate.

"SiZhui!" He heard his name called out from the crowd but didn't actually see Lan JingYi. It did not matter; he had to keep playing.

Sword glares flashed around him, the sounds of metal clashing against metal loud in the battlefield. They could not keep this up for a long time. Lan SiZhui heard calls and cries from the people being attacked by resentful energy and fierce corpses, which Lan SiZhui controlled. While he directed them at the disciples attacking, he directed them not to seriously harm anyone.

"Sect Leader Lan, should we play a counter-score?" Someone asked in a loud voice.

"There's no point. The resentful energy is too powerful. Hop on your swords and get back to safety." Lan XiChen answered.

"Yes, Sect Leader Lan!" The disciples answered and did just that.

"Sect Leader Lan, how come you're not fighting? Do you still have affection towards the traitor Lan SiZhui?" He heard an arrogant voice call out. However, before Lan XiChen could answer, someone else said:

"Maybe it's the other way around! Look! The Lan are not being attacked by the resentful energy. How could it be? Lan SiZhui must've ordered his ghosts not to hurt them!"

"So what? Are we not being attacked by the energy? They should help out!"

"There's no point; Lan WangJi, the Sect Leader's brother is also fighting us! How could he turn against his own brother?"

Lan SiZhui huffed in annoyance, but turned his attention elsewhere instead. He heard a shout, then looked over to see Jiang Cheng standing in front of his mother, while she had her sword out, turned towards where Wei WuXian was fighting the others.

"A-Cheng! Stand aside!" She ordered harshly, however, Jiang Cheng did not move, throwing his arms out.

"Mother, what are you planning to do?"

"What I should've done long ago! It is time for me to properly punish Wei WuXian." She glared at her son, who still didn't move.

"Mother! Please, think this through. Wei WuXian is unruly but his heart is in the right place, can you not see?"

"You think so?!" She glared. "Then why aren't you over there, fighting by his side? Why are you here with us?! You know just fine what he's doing is wrong. Why do you keep defending him?! You want to be punished as well?" She threatened, raising the hand that held Zidian. Jiang Cheng looked over, paling significantly.

“My Lady, that’s enough.” Jiang FengMian inserted himself into the fight, glaring at Madam Yu.

“Jiang FengMian, you’re so quick to defend Wei WuXian, can’t you see what he’s doing?” She glared at him next.

“I can see.” Jiang FengMian answered, his gaze hardening. “I can also see that no matter what he does, you’ll always be against him as well.”

“And why shouldn’t I?!” She snapped. “He is not my son, nor yours, yet he acts like he’s better than all of us! He is arrogant and a nuisance! Does he not deserve to be punished?!”

“If he deserves to be punished, I’m also deserving of it.” Jiang FengMian answered with anger. “Or did I not raise him to be like this?”

“Sect Leader Jiang, is this really the time you finally hear the words I’m saying?” She glared.

“Fine. It is time then.” Jiang FengMian said calmly. “So, if you punish someone, why don’t you start with me?”

“Father!” Jiang Cheng cried in distress.

“A-Cheng, enough!” Jiang FengMian snapped, not even looking at his son. “Go back now, help your disciple mates. Stay out of this.”

“But father!” Jiang Cheng stepped forward, however, in the next moment, a purple sword flared gently knocked him back. Jiang FengMian glared at him hard.

“Did you not hear me?!”

“Sect Leader Jiang, you’re really too biased!” Madam Yu called out. “You hurt your own son just to protect Wei WuXian, you’re truly a bad father!”

“Enough of this, Madam Yu. You wanted to fight me, so let’s fight.” He glared back. Madam Yu scoffed, but also pulled out her sword. The two began to fight not shortly after. Lan SiZhui was amazed on one hand, seeing two seasoned Sect Heads fight was not a sight one experienced every day. On the other hand, he was also terrified and astonished. He knew Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu had their differences, but he never expected it to go beyond vocal fights; but now, on the battlefield of the Burial Mounds, they also fought physically as well!

The two danced around each other with expert movements, they were both established and experienced swordsmen, so their craft was beautifully displayed. At first, it became clear neither really wanted to hurt the other; their attacks were weak and clumsy. However, the more they fought, the more vicious they became.

Their purple robes danced around each other like they knew the others’ movements before they even made them. Their fight was mesmerizing and awful. Their swords sometimes crossed paths, although they were more concentrated on not harming the other, so they didn’t

often meet. Jiang Cheng could do nothing but watch from the sidelines, his expression one full of horror.

“Jiang FengMian!” Madam Yu called out in annoyance. “You say you want to fight, but when it comes to it, you’re just as afraid to fight me as you’re of fighting anyone! Tell me; when did you become so soft?!” She provoked. In reality, at least of what Lan SiZhui knew of him, Jiang FengMian had always had a gentle nature and good temper.

In fact, he didn’t even answer Madam Yu’s taunts, just kept his face straight and concentrated on the fight. Indeed, Jiang FengMian was very gentle when fighting Madam Yu. Lan SiZhui would’ve expected Madam Yu to be the opposite, however, in the beginning, she was also hesitant to fight like Lan SiZhui knew she could. However, Madam Yu’s patience ran out quicker, and soon the first blood was drawn from the match. They did not stop to talk, but instead, continued their bizarre dance. In the meantime, Jiang Cheng also saw that his mother managed to make a cut on his father’s arm, and he quickly turned, looking around to find anyone who could stop them.

Soon, his gaze landed on the battleground near them, where Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian and Lan JingYi fought; Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi with the Sects, Lan JingYi keeping the fierce corpses in bay around them. Jiang Cheng did not hesitate, calling out in a frenzy.

“Wei WuXian!” He drew his sword and entered the battlefield, cutting down a Jin soldier when he rushed towards him without much effort. “Wei WuXian!” Jiang Cheng repeated, and now that he was closer to the other, Wei WuXian actually heard him calling out for him. He turned and looked towards Jiang Cheng, while Lan WangJi stepped in and protected him.

“Jiang Cheng! What are you still doing here! You should go!” Wei WuXian told him with his eyes wide in fear. However, Jiang Cheng was not open to this suggestion at all.

“Wei WuXian, look at what you did!” Jiang Cheng gestured wildly at where his parents were fighting. “What are you doing, are you insane? Actually insane?!”

“Ah?!” Wei WuXian’s eyes widened as he gazed at the scene Jiang Cheng showed him. “Uncle Jiang! Madam Yu!”

“They’re fighting because of you again! Are you not ashamed?!” Jiang Cheng demanded, gripping his sword tightly.

“Jiang Cheng!” Wei WuXian turned to his brother as if he said nothing. “We have to stop them!”

“We?! Wei WuXian, who are you to stand between them?!” Jiang Cheng glared. “Is this whole thing not because of you?! Show some remorse, come back and accept your punishment!”

“Ah?!” Wei WuXian looked at Jiang Cheng, as if he said something stupid. “Jiang Cheng, are they really fighting because of me?” To this, Wei WuXian said nothing, looking upon the fight with distaste on his expression.

“Why are you—” Jiang Cheng began, but then Wei WuXian cried out in fright, leaping away from him. Lan SiZhui could not react in time, because the next moment, Wei WuXian was at the two fighting Sect Heads, throwing himself in front of Jiang FengMian.

Lan SiZhui did not see what Wei WuXian must’ve, looking at the two Sect Heads. He, as Jiang Cheng and Lan WangJi, only followed his movement with their eyes. The movement of the Jiang Sect Heads was visible for a moment, but as time seemed to slow, Lan SiZhui was quick to deduct the situation.

Madam Yu was advancing hard, thrusting her sword forward in an effort to catch Jiang FengMian in the middle. While this was a movement not rare in this fight, it seemed that this time, for some reason, Jiang FengMian didn’t actually expect this move. He moved backwards a second too late, trying to parry the sword away from his middle, otherwise he would receive the sword in his belly. But Madam Yu was also strong and held the sword, only moving it so much to avoid Jiang FengMian’s block.

Just as it seemed that Jiang FengMian would actually lose and receive the sword in his belly, Wei WuXian actually threw himself in between the two of them. Lan SiZhui didn’t see from his vantage point what had actually happened. All he saw was Madam Yu halting her movement and Jiang FengMian landing safely out of her reach, Wei WuXian seemingly just at the tip of the Madam’s sword. For a long, relieved moment Lan SiZhui actually thought Madam Yu stopped before stabbing the boy.

Time seemed to stop as no one but the two of them actually knew what had happened. They looked at each other for a long moment, Madam Yu’s eyes stern and angry, however, there was a minute widening of her eyes that might be explained to be surprise or shock at Wei WuXian’s appearance. Wei WuXian looked back at her calmly, his hands thrown to two sides, as if defending Jiang FengMian’s body.

“Madam Yu,” Wei WuXian began, and it was almost too quiet for Lan SiZhui to hear from the sounds of the nearby battle. However, he was paying such close attention, it seemed all he saw and heard were the trio at the edge of the battlefield. “Please, don’t fight Uncle Jiang on my behalf.” He requested quietly. Madam Yu’s expression was still furious, but her eyes also turned almost searching, as if Wei WuXian was an enigma she couldn’t figure out. “If it is me you’re mad at, please take it up with me.”

Everyone seemed to wait with baited breath for the answer. Wei WuXian swayed lightly as Madam Yu’s grip hardened on her sword.

“How stupid.” Madam Yu sneered, straightening and actually stepping closer. Lan SiZhui tensed, his muscles aching, and he just realized ever since Wei WuXian had threw himself between the Sect Heads, he had been half standing from his position, ready to move at a second’s notice. His muscles strained from the extortion but he didn’t lower himself. “Throwing yourself in the middle of a fight you know nothing about. You always have to be involved, don’t you, Wei WuXian?” She glared.

“Madam Yu!” Jiang FengMian cried, as Wei WuXian slowly brought his hands to where Madam Yu’s sword must’ve been resting towards his middle.

“Madam Yu, if you attack Sect Leader Jiang, naturally, I have to be involved. It’s my debt to repay him.” He said, his voice slightly strained.

“To die for your Sect Leader, Wei WuXian, is only the least you could do.” She said as he pulled the sword away from Wei WuXian, along with her hands he had been holding. Lan SiZhui cringed as the blade came away red, thinking maybe she sliced the other boy’s hand with it as she pulled away. However, the next moment, Wei WuXian still didn’t pull his hand away from his middle and slowly kneeled, looking up at Madam Yu.

Crimson red blood dripped from the end of her blade and she stared back hard, as Wei WuXian’s mouth pulled into a slow smile, a thin drop of blood seeping from the corner. Lan SiZhui could see nothing but the red of his blood, and his crinkled smile.

“If it’s for the Jiang Sect, I’ll die happily.” He replied faintly.

“Wei Ying!” Lan WangJi cried out.

“A-Xian!” Jiang FengMian was also alarmed, rushing to his ward’s side. Wei WuXian fell back into his hands as the Jiang Sect Leader knelt behind him. Now without his body blocking the view, Lan SiZhui could actually see the blood seeping from between his fingers, where Madam Yu had stabbed him in the abdomen. Red painted the front of his robe.

“Wei WuXian, what have you done!” Jiang Cheng also cried out, rushing forwards. However, he did not get far, because thick smoke of resentful energy rose all around them, untamed and released, since Lan SiZhui’s hands were frozen above the strings of his guqin. “Lan SiZhui, stop this!” He demanded, fighting the energy with spiritual energy of his own.

However, Lan SiZhui did not hear him. He could not move, could not see anything else, could not hear but the howling of the wind and the screams of the resentful energy surrounding him. Blood dripped slowly from the wound as Wei WuXian collapsed into Jiang FengMian’s arms, his own limp.

Lan SiZhui never really understood the point of revenge. He was raised as a Lan, and as a Lan, he learned several things. One of them was, if you got offended, you should not retaliate, but forgive instead. If you got hurt, you should bandage the wound and move on. If you were angry, you should reflect on your own conscience instead of attacking the other person. It was never okay to act out of anger or fear, or any other emotions. They were dangerous and would leave the world in chaos. His nature was gentle by default and the Lan’s teachings suited him just fine.

He had never experienced these extreme emotions the Lan teachings were against. He got angry sometimes, annoyed often. He got hurt by people constantly, but he never really took it personally. Since his nature was not to react harshly, he never thought he’d one day feel so strongly as to want to retaliate in any way his offence.

What he was feeling in this moment, he could not describe. This was not something he ever experienced before. He knew part of it had to be the resentful energy that’s been tainting him in the past few months, but Lan SiZhui could not bring himself to care about that in the moment.

The Sects, while they claimed righteousness, did not act as such. Lan SiZhui got into a web of conspiracies that he had a hard time getting out of, but despite this, anyone who would've been willing to listen and think should've figured it out by now that Lan SiZhui was not the one to be judged here. Yes, he did bad things lately, but wasn't he pushed to the edge? Wasn't he forced to act out like this? He was not from this time, but he got to know many people while they've been here. These people, they should've known by now how his nature was. Did they really not think this through or were they just so intimidated by the Jin and Wen Sects that they dare not go against anything they said?

Or did he just judge the whole situation wrong? After all, while he thought he presented himself to the people the same way he had at home, he also kept a lot of secrets. Did, perhaps, people see him as a shifty person who was selfish? Was he so secluded with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi that he misjudged his effect on others? After all, Wei WuXian constantly told them they were weird and shifty. He always thought Wei WuXian was just overly paranoid, but he couldn't help but wonder. Lan WangJi didn't trust them either, after all, and he was a Lan. Lan XiChen hadn't either, until he learned the truth. So, really, did Lan SiZhui see himself clearly in this time? Was he just someone who turned up one day and began plotting, only to end up being the villain?

However... Did it even matter at this point how people saw him as? They made their stance clear, have they not? They were on opposite sides now. Lan SiZhui couldn't convince those he wanted about his righteous nature, so what was the point of trying anymore? Should he just accept his fate? Should he just claim his role and not pretend he was not anything like the YiLing Patriarch?

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi called out, his voice frightened and urgent. "SiZhui, stop!"

Why should he? Did these people not deserve their fate? He wanted to tell him, to explain to Lan JingYi the revelation he came to. He was, indeed, the villain. People believed so strongly in this, they even killed Wei WuXian, who had never done anything that would prompt such distrust as they had in him. It was his fault his former adoptive father laid limp in the middle of the Burial Mounds.

The first time did not happen like this. Lan SiZhui knew this. He had been here. They were barely touched by outside forces, thanks to Wei WuXian. When it came to his death, even though Lan SiZhui was only a child back then, he had learned since then, Wei WuXian took it to the Sects, not the other way around.

"SiZhui!" He heard Lan JingYi call out once more. "SiZhui, we can save him!"

Save him? Lan SiZhui almost scoffed at that. He saw Madam Yu's stance. She was prepared to hit Jiang FengMian with her spiritual energy concentrated in her sword. A stab, Wei WuXian could survive. However, Madam Yu was, for all Wei WuXian was strong, much stronger than any of them. If she truly hit Wei WuXian with that blow she intended for Jiang FengMian, there was no question that he would die shortly.

"Lan SiZhui!" A new voice called out, cold and hard, unforgiving. Lan SiZhui opened his eyes, but could see nothing through the swirling black smoke around him. It was thick and surrounding him, a black vortex he sat in the middle of. He did not even realize his fingers



began to play a new score, one he haven't used since Nightless City. "Lan SiZhui, *stop!*" It was not the words that made Lan SiZhui actually cease his play, but the slight desperation and panic he had never heard from the man before.

As his score slowed, so did the resentful energy around him, allowing him to glimpse at the battleground. There were people laying on the ground, dead or dying, many still standing and fighting invisible forces or each other. If Lan SiZhui cared more about that at the moment, he would've realized it was his own spell that made these people his puppets, turning the Sects against each other.

However, he only had eye for the scene right in front of him. Lan WangJi was kneeling next to Wei WuXian's limp form, pressing a scrap of white cloth to his torso where the wound bled. Lan SiZhui could not see Madam Yu, Jiang FengMian or even Jiang Cheng. Lan WangJi did not look at Wei WuXian, but at Lan SiZhui, gaze hard and unforgiving.

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi called out from the side. Lan SiZhui looked over, seeing him push a puppet away from himself before kicking it away, a Graveyard-Purging talisman on his chest, a fierce scowl on his face. As Lan SiZhui looked to him, he also turned to him. "SiZhui, stop! We need to go."

"Go?" Lan SiZhui whispered. Lan JingYi exchanged a look with Lan XiChen, then hurried over to Lan SiZhui, pushing through the thick resentful fog around him with gritted teeth. He grabbed his shoulder hard, hard enough to bruise, but Lan SiZhui barely noticed the pain.

"SiZhui, Wei WuXian needs a doctor, *now*. He can be saved. Please, listen to me." Lan SiZhui looked back at the figures in front of him, but Lan JingYi took hold of his chin roughly and turned his face back towards him. His usually gentle or mischievous features were hard-set and stern. He was angry, with tears in his eyes he tried hard to blink away. "We need to go. Find Wen Qing, save Wei WuXian. Now, SiZhui."

"Wen Qing?" Lan SiZhui breathed. What was the point? She was a good doctor but miracles even she couldn't do. With the wound, Lan SiZhui was afraid...

"Yes, her!" Lan JingYi snapped. "SiZhui, don't do this. This is not you." He wiped at his eyes and Lan SiZhui blinked at him. "Don't lose hope. Wen Qing is the best doctor I've ever come across. If someone can save Wei WuXian it is her. You know better than any of us that she'd treated him for so long."

Even though Lan SiZhui knew Lan JingYi was wrong, that what he was talking about had happened in a different life, one that hadn't happened because the three of them messed with the timeline, this little thought forced him to think above the white-hot noise that had consumed him in the past few minutes.

"Find Wen Qing?" He asked back. Lan JingYi was a lot of things but stupid he was not. If he said Wen Qing could help, there must've been something Lan SiZhui didn't know.

"Yes." Lan JingYi nodded. "Quick." Lan SiZhui looked at him for a long moment, then his sluggish brain began to function. Right. Find Wen Qing. Just like on his night hunts, he decided to concentrate on one task first, which was this. Wen Qing, where was she? For a

moment, Lan SiZhui thought they'd need to go back to Dafan, then he remembered they were not there anymore. He took Wen Qing and the remaining Wen away from the Jin camp and brought them here. Here, where he unleashed Hell upon the Burial Mounds.

"She's—She's inside!" Lan SiZhui turned, about to stand and go inside. However, before he could, Lan JingYi caught his arm.

"She's not there anymore. I know where she is. I'll take you to her, but we need to go, *now!*" He emphasized again. He pulled on Lan SiZhui's shoulder, bunching the fabric of his robes in his fist, not caring at all about decorum.

"Where is she?" Lan SiZhui asked, now panicked. If she was Wei WuXian's only choice... But why would she leave? And where? And how?

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi took both his shoulders once they were standing, staring hard into his eyes. "I know you're scared, but you have to have your wits about you. We're still in the middle of battle." As an afterthought or to emphasize his point, he looked over where the Sect's forces still fought, Lan XiChen holding them back. "Do you trust me?" Lan JingYi asked, turning back to him. Lan SiZhui nodded numbly. "Then come. *Now.*"

"Okay." He breathed, unable to speak up. Lan JingYi nodded, then fumbled with something around his sleeves, then pressed his hand to his chest, applying a Graveyard-Purging talisman onto him. Lan SiZhui looked down at the familiar design. For a moment, he got lost in the memories. How easy it had seemed back then. How smart they thought themselves. They have created this talisman with so much arrogance, thinking it was only a matter of coming to the Burial Mounds, in order to stop the Wen. How they didn't know back then that all they did was to give away their role from the future to Wen Chao and hurry the events that would otherwise come.

"I will stay and hold them back. Try to reason with them." Lan XiChen said from closer than Lan SiZhui saw him last. He looked up, seeing him stand next to Lan WangJi, who had picked up Wei WuXian's limp body. His own white robes were streaked with dirt, mud and blood. "Please be careful. Don't try to contact me. If you don't hear from me, assume they're coming for you."

"Brother." Lan WangJi looked to him with wide eyes, but Lan XiChen would not hear it.

"WangJi, when they attacked Cloud Recesses, you gave me no choice but to leave." He said pointedly, looking at his brother heatedly. "Do not force me to do the same."

"Don't let them..." Lan WangJi began, but Lan XiChen shook his head.

"I'm Sect Leader, WangJi. I know what I'm doing. Or if I don't, that's on me. Now *go.*" His order booked no argument. Lan WangJi could not argue with it either. He nodded, his gaze steely, and worried at the same time. Lan XiChen then looked over at Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi. "Thank the Jin in my name. They're in my debt. Cloud Recesses will protect them."

"Thank you." Lan JingYi nodded, then hopped on his sword, pulling Lan SiZhui after him forcefully. As soon as Lan WangJi was also on his sword, they took off, not even looking

back. All Lan SiZhui could do was to hold onto Lan JingYi and not take his eyes off the lifeless form of Wei WuXian in Lan WangJi's arms.

## Despair III.

Lan SiZhui didn't know how long it took them to arrive, or even whereabout they were. On the whole way he was looking at Wei WuXian while feeling faint himself. He didn't dare to take his eyes off his former adoptive father, nor did he dare let go of Lan JingYi. He thought his mind would return to him after a time, however, the whole time a single thought circled in his mind and nothing else.

What happens if Wei WuXian dies?

There was no answer he could come up with. He didn't even think of theories. All he could think of was the question itself while they roared through clouds. After a time, they arrived. Lan SiZhui only noticed their descent because Lan JingYi reached back to hold him while they got lower. Only then did Lan SiZhui look away, his eyes burning from strain and dryness as he turned them on something else.

He saw rooftops and finally thought to take a look around. They were in a relatively flat area, though there were several smaller and bigger mountains around them, but the difference wasn't vast. As they lowered too much for him to see the horizon, he looked to the small village they headed towards. It was not a particularly nice view, even from the top. The rooftops were old and more than half had holes in them. Some had been patched clumsily, some older patches as well that had given up long ago and creating a bigger hole than the original had been.

The streets were abandoned and overgrown with wildlife. Lan SiZhui even saw a snake slither away before they landed on the main street. There was a slight fog that settled over the village, which was more pronounced now that they've landed. As they stepped off the swords, they kicked up dirt. Lan SiZhui looked around, seeing the houses dark. This reminded him so much of Yi city, he gave a slight shudder, though this village was obviously smaller and much poorer. A window shutter creaked somewhere as the wind swayed it.

"Where are we?" Lan WangJi asked cautiously, holding Wei WuXian against his chest with one hand while the other gripped Bichen tightly.

"We need help!" Lan JingYi called out, ignoring Lan WangJi's question. "Come, quick!" Lan SiZhui thought the village was completely empty. However, moments later he heard movement and a crash. He instinctively moved, his hand reaching for his sleeve for Hudie. However, someone clamped a hand on his wrist. Before he could look, Wen Qing appeared in the doorway to one of the houses, looking like she had been bathed in dirt. She looked around, her eyes settling on Lan WangJi and the limp body in his arms.

"Bring him inside!" She ordered, holding a curtain away from the door she had seemingly kicked out. It laid against the outer wall at a strange angle. Lan WangJi hesitated only for a moment, then he moved, hurrying towards her and the house. Lan SiZhui stepped forward to follow, however, before he could take more steps, the hold on his arm strengthened and he was yanked back.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jin Ling asked, staring at him. Lan SiZhui looked back at him with wide eyes, not having expected him to be there. He didn’t even know how Jin Ling got to be in the same place as Wen Qing. Nor how Wen Qing came to be in such place. He looked back at Wen Qing, whom Lan WangJi just passed. Before she made to follow them, she caught Lan SiZhui’s eyes.

“You’re of no help. Stay outside and calm down.” She ordered, then with that she turned back and went inside after Lan WangJi. Lan SiZhui could only look after them dumbly.

“SiZhui, she’s right.” Lan JingYi took hold of his shoulder. Lan SiZhui turned to look at him. Lan JingYi’s eyebrows furrowed. “Are you alright?”

“Lan SiZhui, you—” Jin Ling began, only to be hushed by Lan JingYi immediately. He searched Lan SiZhui’s eyes.

“SiZhui?”

“I need to sit down.” Lan SiZhui said hoarsely. Lan JingYi nodded, but just as Lan SiZhui took a step, he stumbled.



“Young Masters, don’t worry. He will wake up now.” Lan SiZhui heard as he slowly came to. The voice was the familiar and welcome gentle, soft hum of Wen Ning. He had no memory of falling asleep, if that was what he was doing. He was sure he didn’t recall going inside a house, but as he blinked his eyes open, stinging from strain and something else probably, what he saw was a mostly intact ceiling and thin walls around him. Blinking, looking over, he saw Wen Ning indeed next to him, looking at him intently before a gentle, caring smile took over his features.

“SiZhui!” Lan JingYi exclaimed, also coming into view over Lan SiZhui’s bed.

“Ah, Lan SiZhui, here.” Wen Ning reached out and brought a cup of liquid forth, handing it over to him. Lan SiZhui hesitated only a moment before he drank from it, finding it herbal and a little bit spicy. He frowned, looking up at Wen Ning, hoping for explanation. “It’s a draught my sister made for you. It helps with the shock.”

“Shock?” Lan SiZhui frowned, looking back down into his drink. He slowly sat up properly, propping himself against the headboard of the creaky, old, swaying bed.

“Ah, brother Wen, thank you for your help.” Lan JingYi said. He had a strange, restless energy about him that was unusual. He seemed impatient and uncomfortable. “Could you please leave us to discuss some things? It won’t take long and afterwards, I’m sure you’ll be needed...”

This was also a testament to the strange mood he was in. Usually, Lan JingYi didn’t mind putting off uncomfortable discussions, which Lan SiZhui was almost sure this would be. Now he didn’t even try to be subtle about wanting Wen Ning gone. Lan SiZhui looked between them, and in the end, his cousin nodded understandingly, and rose.

“Brothers, let me know if you need me.”

“We will. Thank you.” Lan JingYi smiled at him, which Wen Ning returned before leaving the house. Lan JingYi glanced behind himself, where Lan SiZhui could see Jin Ling sitting. The other boy was sitting on a bench pushed to the wall, which was in the same sorry state as the rest of the house. Jin Ling was leaning against the wall, though his back was straight and stiff. He had his arms crossed over his chest, glaring into the air. Lan JingYi didn’t console him though, but instead cast a silencing charm onto the house and returned to a small stool next to Lan SiZhui’s bed.

There was an awkward moment when none of them spoke, then Lan SiZhui decided to break the silence.

“What is this place?” Instead of answering, Jin Ling huffed, annoyed, rolling his eyes. He turned to Lan SiZhui then.

“Wei WuXian is alive.”

“Ah?!” Lan SiZhui gripped the cloth he had as a blanket and attempted to get up from his cot, but before he could move, Lan JingYi gripped his shoulder and pushed him back down. This, Lan SiZhui noted with mounting anxiety, was also unusual from him.

“Calm down. You’re not to visit him. Nobody is, actually. Wen Qing had to sneak sleeping draught to Lan WangJi so he would fuck off, too.”

“Jin Ling.”

“JingYi.” Jin Ling glared at the other boy, then looked away. “Anyways, I thought you should know, so you can actually concentrate on the things that matter.” Jin Ling paused. “Before we get into it, Lan JingYi told me about what happened in the Burial Mounds.”

“Ah?” Lan SiZhui glanced at Lan JingYi, who still seemed strange. His friend nodded, looking even more uncomfortable than before. He wringed his hands in his lap.

“I told him about the argument, though there was not much to tell about that. We all knew all this.” He shook his head. “Then after Wei WuXian was injured, you...” He trailed off, looking like he didn’t know what to say. “SiZhui, after we’ve arrived here, you collapsed. It’s been almost a full day since then, you slept until now. Wen Qing came by to examine you a little. She said...” He huffed, looking at something near the entrance, but because Lan SiZhui sat as he was, he didn’t see what.

“She said, because of the state of your meridians, you’re more vulnerable to the resentful energies. The Yin Iron tainted your Core already.” Jin Ling took over, then trailed off and hesitated. Then he shrugged. “Or something of that effect. Ask her if you care.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi said in a warning tone. He turned to Lan SiZhui, taking a deep breath. “What she said was this: the state of your meridians make you more vulnerable to the resentful energy. However, your state is right now not so different than what she had experienced with Wen RuoHan.” He said, uncomfortably. Lan SiZhui understood now, why

his friends acted so strange. He lowered his gaze to his lap, playing with the cloth. “Your Core is tainted by the resentful energy, and it is dangerous to let it fester there. She explained that the way this works is the resentful energy wants to consume any energy it can, so it becomes stronger. This disturbance in the person’s spiritual energy could lead to a qi deviation. This is why if someone whose Core is intact tries to use resentful energy, they die within a short time; it depends on the person’s tolerance towards internal disturbance and strength of their Core. The resentful energy either destroys their Core or they qi deviate. The pain of it would drive them crazy. Their meridians would collapse and eventually, the body would give in.”

He paused. “That’s what she said anyways. She’s the healer, she must know what she’s talking about.” He paused again, then continued: “According to Wen Qing, since your meridians are already crushed, you cannot feel the effect the Yin Iron has on you. This could also mean the possibility of a qi deviation is lower, but since your Core is intact and your meridians could be repaired with sufficient meditation, if your Core won’t give up by then, it would always remain a possibility. With Wen RuoHan, this was different because he could feel the effects as well. He qi deviated before because of this as well. He was mad with pain, according to Wen Qing. Since you’re not, it is safe to assume you cannot feel it, however, this doesn’t mean the resentful energy is not hurting you. *Cleansing* helps...” He trailed off again, glancing towards the entrance again. “But it’s not a cure. It’s... She said it is likely you’ve interacted too much with the Yin Iron already that there might be no going back.”

“So... I’m dying?” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“It’s...” Lan JingYi hesitated, then shrugged. “She doesn’t know. Wen RuoHan was dying, but then again, he had his Core and meridians intact before he figured out the whole no Core thing, and by then it was too late for him.”

“So, it is not certain I’d die?” Lan SiZhui asked not understanding.

“We don’t know.” Jin Ling said, sounding frustrated. “She said your Golden Core is unnaturally resistant and she said that this makes her unsure if the Yin Iron’s effect from your childhood really was the reason Wen ZhuLiu couldn’t destroy your Core. She said this was not her expertise and she didn’t even know if anyone knew more about this, since there aren’t many demonic cultivators, if any at this time.”

“She suspects what you’ve experienced back in the Burial Mounds was similar to a qi deviation, but since your meridians are damaged, it cannot be said for sure. However these... violent... episodes, she said Wen RuoHan experienced them sometimes as well, one time it led to a qi deviation.” Lan JingYi explained.

Lan SiZhui nodded, acknowledging this. Since they’ve parted in Dafan, Wen Qing haven’t really examined him – as far as he knew, anyways – so it was reasonable that he hadn’t heard about this earlier. He was quiet for a moment, contemplating this, but he had bigger worries at the moment, so he eventually turned back to Jin Ling.

“Where are we?”

“Not far from Nightless City.” Jin Ling answered courtly. Lan SiZhui didn’t know why he didn’t want to tell him, so frustrated, he turned to Lan JingYi next, who paused, looking back at Lan SiZhui confused for a moment, then understanding he was waiting for the answer, he sighed, but answered properly.

“After we sent Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi off with our message, we knew that it was only a matter of time before the Jin learned about your location. We needed to come up with a plan. It wasn’t...” He hesitated, looked over at Jin Ling, then continued. “We were trying to figure out what to do. Lan XiChen wanted to go to you and talk you into giving up and coming back, to have a trial. He was ready to sacrifice the Sect in order to protect you. We knew you wouldn’t want that, so we tried to come up with a different idea. It wasn’t easy.

“We needed to come up with something that would either get you out of the situation completely or would not result in a bloodbath; we’ve decided on the latter, since the former seemed too tricky. We still didn’t have Jin GuangShan or Jin GuangYao’s letter that they claimed had come from a friend of yours. Jin GuangShan was constantly interrogating us on where you were. Naturally, since me, Lan WangJi, Lan XiChen and Wei WuXian were not part of his Sect, he couldn’t very well force us to admit anything, unless he wanted to offend the other Sects. Naturally, this would not go down well with the Jiang Sect especially.”

“Why especially them?” Lan SiZhui frowned, finding strange how carefully Lan JingYi emphasized this point. Here, Jin Ling readily took over, though his demeanor and tone was bored, it was obvious he wanted to tell this to Lan SiZhui eagerly – otherwise he wouldn’t have said anything.

“My father and Jiang YanLi, they did announce their continued engagement on the banquet following the Crowd Hunt as we suspected.” He said. “It was joyous or whatever, but yeah. My father and mother are to be married in the spring.”

“So soon?” Lan SiZhui was surprised. It was custom to wait with the wedding, after all, this was an arranged marriage, so it wasn’t like they were in a rush. Apparently, he was wrong. Jin Ling huffed.

“Yes, well. Apparently, the Jiang Sect is a bit split, ever since the war. From what I’ve heard, Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian’s fights weren’t the only outfall of the war. Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu had been at odds ever since the end of the Sunshot Campaign. I’ve overheard some rumors that Madam Yu had it in for Wei WuXian for his demonic cultivation since then. Apparently, she is more than furious about it. I’ve heard she had been beating Wei WuXian, trying to punish him or teach him a lesson, but Jiang FengMian refuses to do anything to appease her. Like kick him out or something like that. Some people even think it would be better if he did, because Wei WuXian’s treatment at home had been horrible.

“I don’t know many details, but because of this, in some twisted way, Jiang YanLi and Jiang FengMian agreed to continue the engagement. Apparently, besides being furious with Wei WuXian, Madam Yu also wanted to form a proper alliance with the Jin. It is, they say, because of the attack on Lotus Pier before the campaign. She is convinced that since you were a part of the Lan Sect, they’re untrustworthy, and since Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen are sworn brothers, the Nie wouldn’t cut it either. They say Madam Yu is preparing for a war where the Nie and Lan Sects would go against the others – where she got that from, nobody



knows and it's not certain even it's true that that's what she's preparing to either, but..." He shrugged.

"Anyways, this engagement would mean a little more than a marriage match. Madam Yu wants alliance with the Jin and it would be guaranteed through the marriage. So, she pushed. Nobody was able to tell why the others agreed. Some say Jiang YanLi still has feelings towards Jin ZiXuan, that's why she agreed and Jiang FengMian couldn't say no to his daughter. Another theory is that this is supposed to be a peace offering on Jiang FengMian's part. It would placate Madam Yu and take her focus off Wei WuXian, or perhaps even the price to pay for him to stay in the Sect – which is why Jiang YanLi would agree to this at all, to protect him. Another one obviously is that there is going to be a power struggle between the Sects now that there's a vacuum after the Wen Sect and it needs to be filled – and knowing their strengths, the Jiang Sect is smart enough to know where to put their loyalties."

"So, why the rush?" Lan JingYi asked. "It seems impractical."

"I'll try to explain this as simply as I can. I know you know this, but it's relevant, so I'm going to tell you anyways. So, when there's a cultivator, who wants to create a group of people who night-hunt in the area and generally take care of these things, they will most often flock into groups of their family. This is because if a person has a strong enough cultivation to form a Golden Core, it is likely his siblings, cousins and other relatives also have strong cultivation that could be cultivated into a Golden Core."

"Jin Ling, are you going to tell us the entire history of cultivation?" Lan JingYi made a face. "Unlike what you think, the Jin Sect isn't the only one who teaches their students sufficiently. We know this."

"I know you know this." Jin Ling glared at the other. "As I said just now, I know and I'm still telling you because it's relevant. Can you just shut up and listen?" At this, Lan JingYi rolled his eyes, but gestured Jin Ling to continue.

"So. A group like I just described is a family, who learn to cultivate, take care of monsters and also encourage their descendants to do so as well. Several generations of it and people are going to marry into the family, bringing new blood into it. Because of this, it is not quite accurate to call this group a group of blood relatives, so the term Clan is introduced.

"A Clan like this is a familial Clan. However, say this Clan married one of theirs off to a family who also have a potential to become a cultivation Clan. Then this second Clan will become the familial Clan to the original Clan. These two Clans are in relation to each other. Let's say, because of this, these two Clans decide to become one. Then even outsiders will become part of the original Clan, making them not familial anymore, but aspiring. Aspiring Clans allow outsiders who are not part of the family enter into the Clan as well.

"Now, say they take in so many outsiders, with time, the original family who founded this aspiring Clan first will become fewer in numbers amongst the Clan, that's when typically we begin to call this Clan a Sect. They do not concentrate on family anymore but on their cultivation, passing down this knowledge. This could also happen without two Clans merging, a Clan can just decide to expand their numbers by taking in outsiders, eventually forming a Sect.

“Now, let’s say one of the main family decides to marry someone on the outside, creating the same scenario as it had been before, with the original concept, except here the original family now has a Sect instead of a Clan. Now, this family member who married out of the family decides to pass their cultivation to the next generation within the family they married into, creating a Clan of their own. Now this new Clan is a familial Clan to the original Sect. They don’t necessarily need to be blood relatives at all, I think the Su Clan and Lan Sect aren’t?” He looked questioningly at Lan JingYi, who nodded.

“The Su Clan was founded by someone who was the cousin of someone who married into the Sect. The Su are originally not blood relatives to the Lan, but related by marriage in the first place, making them a familial Clan. This happened many generations ago though.”

“Yes. So, if this new familial Clan decides to take in outer disciples as well, they become an aspiring Clan. Oftentimes, the original family doesn’t like this, and because of that, there are often fights amongst familial Clans and Sects. This is not unusual. We all know this.

“Anyways, the point is, every organization needs a leader. With a familial Clan, oftentimes this is the head of the family, the patriarch or matriarch, or alternatively the founder of the Clan. In this scenario, succession is straightforward. It took a long time for people to realize it was easier to name the head of the Clan’s firstborn to be the Clan heir. In a familial Clan, it is usual that the head of the Clan doesn’t have a child, so the role goes to the next sibling, or cousin in line, more often the one who is the closest to the Clan Leader.

“In a Sect, this is different a bit. There is precedent that the family who founded a Sect died out completely, leaving the Sect without a Leader or a Leader heir. This is part of the reason why elders had been established in Sects, so would this ever happen, a council of learned members of a Sect can choose a member of the Sect they find eligible to the role. This decision can be swayed by the word of the public. However, Sect Leaders are rarely chosen as long as the main family’s bloodline is still alive. It is not without precedent that a distant relative was found, who had not founded his own Clan, and made into Sect Leader.

“Now, as said previously, the firstborn is most often chosen, but what if the firstborn is unfit to be Sect Leader? Well, naturally, the next in line is chosen. If there isn’t one, they look for relatives, again.”

“What about illegitimate children?” Lan JingYi asked.

“Mn. Good question. Now, typically, nobody cares if a child is illegitimate. An heir is an heir, no matter who the mother is or what relation they had to the Sect Leader. This is why Jin GuangYao was able to become Sect Leader in the first place – this is why he was able to be recognized officially in the first place as well.”

“So, the only requirement to be a Sect Leader is being the child of the main family?”

“A child who could inherit the position.” Jin Ling nodded.

“What stops any of them from picking up a pregnant woman on the street and claiming that’s his unborn child in her belly? Could Jin GuangYao do that for example?”

“Er.” Jin Ling made a face. “These things are properly monitored. I’m sure when he was brought into the Sect Leader’s family, his background and relations were thoroughly researched. Besides, he was probably sworn.”

“Sworn?” Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling explained:

“Well, as underhanded this was, Jin GuangShan is not stupid and he has elders to answer to, like every other Sect Leader. To avoid this exact situation, Jin GuangYao was probably questioned about his relations – and since this was probably researched as well, they knew if he was truthful or not. Then if they found him truthful, they probably made him swear he has no secret children or anything of the likes to sabotage the succession line.”

“At least, they’re not being idiots about it.” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Wars were fought over this, believe me.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “These things are very well monitored.” He paused. “However, as you can imagine, once Jin GuangYao was sworn, nothing stops him from sabotaging the succession line. He could stab Jin ZiXuan in the middle of Koi Tower and while I’m sure he would be severely punished for it, nobody would bat an eye if he became Sect Leader later.”

“So, why doesn’t he?”

“Murder is not a well-received way to earn trust, weirdly enough.” Jin Ling threw him a flat look. “Also if this starts, a circle also starts. I had to learn about a Sect Leader’s family once, where people killed each other openly for the Sect Leader position. Ah, how did it go? Shen Qi, the eldest brother, killed his father, taking over the position. He was killed by his younger brother, Shen Lan. Shen Lan had a son, but they were both killed by Shen Lan’s maternal uncle, who wanted the position himself. However, Shen Lan also had a wife, who was forced to marry the uncle. She killed him in his sleep, took the position claiming she was with child from Shen Lan. However, this was not true, because she had a lover, Bo Chan, one of the Sect’s disciple. Once the wife gave birth, Bo Chan killed her, telling everyone the child was his, taking the position...”

“Alright, I think we get it.” Lan JingYi said with an all-suffering expression. “Jin Ling, do you really have to learn such things?”

“I’m a gentry Sect’s heir. What the fuck do you think?” Jin Ling scoffed at him.

“What a mess.” Lan JingYi looked on with a sour face. Lan SiZhui could only agree. They were both very fortunate to have been born – or in Lan SiZhui’s case, brought – into the position they were in, so they never had to know or worry about such politics. Clearly, Jin Ling knew all this. “You didn’t answer the question though.” Lan JingYi made a face. “Why marry them so soon?”

“There are rumors going around that Jin GuangShan began to teach Jin GuangYao the ropes of becoming a Sect Leader. Since Jin GuangShan can choose to make Jin GuangYao his heir instead, this could mean Jin ZiXuan doesn’t become Sect Leader, once Jin GuangShan retires or dies.”

“I didn’t know this was so important to him.” Lan JingYi hummed.

“This isn’t necessarily his doing. I think this is Madam Jin and Madam Yu’s doing, an effort to prevent Jin GuangYao from getting the position.”

“Why would that matter to them?”

“Well, naturally, Jin GuangYao is not Madam Jin’s son. For one, pride is important here – for an illegitimate child to get into the position of the Sect Leader, she would be so shamed, she could kill herself and people would praise her for it. In general this isn’t anything strange, but it is still a shame towards the woman who birthed the child they thought for years would become a Sect Leader. For her child to be cast aside this easily...

“Second, the arrangement to marry Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan was made with the assumption that Jin ZiXuan would become Sect Leader. If this is a deal breaker for the Jiang Sect, which, with Madam Yu’s pride also it can be nothing less, then the marriage would never happen. This would be an offense enough that the Jiang Sect could annihilate the Jin Sect and everyone would nod in understanding. Madam Jin and Madam Yu are also good friends. They have been planning this marriage for a long time now.”

“I guess.” Lan JingYi hummed. “But how would a marriage ensure Jin ZiXuan becomes Sect Leader?”

“It is generally approved to have the bloodline kept up.” Jin Ling explained. “If Jin ZiXuan marries and produces an heir for the Jin Sect, surely, he will be chosen over Jin GuangYao. Jin GuangShan would favor that better than a smart mind, or else any passing intelligent person could become Sect Leader. But to keep the main family’s blood up, that would be Jin ZiXuan and Madam Jin’s trump card in this situation. This is why they’re also rushing it – would Jin GuangYao find a suitable match and also produce an heir, he would be sure to become Sect Leader later on.”

“Wait.” Lan JingYi furrowed his brows. “So, what you’re saying is, the question of who inherits the Sect Leader position is actually dependent on who has a child first?”

“Right now, it is.” Jin Ling nodded.

“Wait, so if Jin GuangYao’s son survived, he’d have been the next in line for Sect Leader, not you?” Lan JingYi asked.

“No.” Jin Ling looked at him flatly. “My situation is this: back then, Jin ZiXuan had a child first, therefore, he was supposed to become Sect Leader later on. However, isn’t it unfortunate, he died before Jin GuangShan? Think about it.”

“Ah?!” Lan JingYi’s eyes widened. “But I thought Jin GuangYao liked his half-brother and it was only an accident on Qionggqi Path that he was caught up in this.”

“He went there and Wei WuXian was still provoked to the point of killing several people back then, do you really think my uncle couldn’t have stopped him from going, or convince Su She to stop his plans? Naturally, Jin GuangYao allowed him to go.”

“He assassinated his own brother in such a sneaky way?”

“If this helps, I don’t think Jin GuangYao’s intention was really to kill him. However, that he didn’t do anything to stop the situation from escalating...” He sighed.

“Wait, doesn’t Jin GuangYao have different relatives as well? You said the succession goes towards the next in line if a child isn’t available. How come you’re Sect Leader then?”

“A child was available though.” Jin Ling shook his head. “This is why my situation is kind of unique. I was the child of a Sect heir, someone who was supposed to become a Sect Leader. Because of this, Jin GuangYao wasn’t really... It’s not that he wasn’t Sect Leader, because in most senses, he was. However, it was always known in the Koi Tower that Jin GuangYao was never supposed to become Sect Leader and... Well, it wasn’t expected from me, but people always just assumed once I was of age, I’d take over the Sect. Ah, you know how it was with Lan XiChen and Lan QiRen?” At Lan JingYi’s negative headshake, Jin Ling explained:

“Well, Lan XiChen’s father died when Lan XiChen was about ten years old. Was he a little older, over sixteen, there would have been a choice to be made; either he accepted the position earlier and lead the Sect while the elders guided him and taught him the ropes, or he could’ve accepted Lan QiRen’s tutelage and learned under him as Lan QiRen being acting Sect Leader until Lan XiChen came of age. Since his father died at ten, the second scenario was automatically in action, since Lan XiChen was too young to assume the position, even with the elders in place. So, since Lan XiChen was ten, his uncle, seeing he was the younger brother of the previous Sect Leader, took over as acting Sect Leader, teaching Lan XiChen the ropes, the elders being in charge of the decisions mostly.

“This is the traditional way. The more unorthodox way was how my uncle Jiang and Nie MingJue came to become Sect Leaders. They were both around or over sixteen when their father died, so because of that, they were offered to lead the Sect while the elders helped out, or one of their older family members would become acting Sect Leader – or if they had none, name one of the elders to be in charge. However, they both chose to lead the Sect on their own.

“My situation is more similar to Lan XiChen’s. My father died when I was very young, so my uncle was assumed to become acting Sect Leader and teach me the ropes until I came of age. It is only because I was so young when my father died, pretty much everyone forgot I was supposed to become Sect Leader.”

“But then, wasn’t it important to Jin GuangYao to have an heir?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“It’s like this, if Jin GuangYao had an heir of his own, I could die at any time and nobody would bat an eye. Since Jin GuangYao had been acting Sect Leader for so long, not many cared he was not actually supposed to be Sect Leader in the first place – since he was also the recognized child of Jin GuangShan, this position could’ve been his anyways, only because of his unfortunate circumstances this wasn’t the case.”

“That’s so sad.” Lan JingYi frowned. “He basically raised you. Wouldn’t he just had been happy to have you as his heir?”

“I don’t know. Apparently, I didn’t know him as well as I thought.” Jin Ling scoffed, looking away. There was a pause, then:

“Hey, since we’ve come to the past, do you think in the future there’s nobody in the Sect Leader position in the Jin Sect then?” Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling went to answer, then his eyes widened.

“Oh, fuck.”

“What?” Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling looked over at him, his expression one of horror.

“If I went missing in the future, they would either put the elders in charge... or...”

“Or?” Lan JingYi prompted.

“Or my most capable and eldest blood relative.” Jin Ling told him in a dramatic voice. Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows, trying to think.

“Is that... Jiang WanYin?” He asked, unsure. “Can your maternal uncle who is Sect Leader take another Sect Leader position, even temporarily?”

“No, and he isn’t even the eldest. He is also my maternal uncle, therefore not part of the Jin family.” Jin Ling shook his head, his eyes still wide. Then, who else...? “SiZhui, do you know who my eldest and most capable blood relative is in the future?”

“Mm...” Lan SiZhui thought. “Senior Wei isn’t your blood relative...” He thought out loud, however, Jin Ling cut him off.

“*He* isn’t.” Lan SiZhui looked over, confused. “SiZhui. Who is the person whose body he took over?!”

“Mo XuanYu. He is...” Lan SiZhui trailed off, his mouth staying open in shock.

“Wait!” Lan JingYi sat up straight, staring at Jin Ling. “Wait, you’re saying, with you gone, Wei WuXian in Mo XuanYu’s body is actually in charge of the Jin Sect?!” A huge, face-splitting grin took over his face.

“Don’t even say it out loud! Who knows if the future even exists anymore, maybe it’s all gone!” Jin Ling’s desperate grasps for reassurance were for nothing, though, because Lan JingYi collapsed onto the ground, holding his stomach he laughed so hard. Jin Ling looked a little green.

Once Lan JingYi could breathe again, he sprawled out on the flood, catching his breath, wiping tears from his eyes. “Ahh, this is too good!”

“This is really, really bad!” Jin Ling held his head. Feeling sympathy for Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui tried to offer reassurances:

“I’m sure he’s not actually put in charge. After all, Mo XuanYu’s soul is gone. Wei WuXian isn’t your blood relative, and most people know this, since his appearance also resembles that

of the past...”

“I hope you’re right, I hope nobody was so fucking stupid to suggest something like this. What does Wei WuXian even know about being a Sect Leader? I’ll return to my disciples being turned into apples, so Wei WuXian’s donkey can eat them for lunch!”

“Ah, Jin Ling, just don’t think about it.” Lan SiZhui frowned in sympathy.

“Right, right, Young Mistress, don’t worry! I’m sure your uncle is also there, reigning him in!” Lan JingYi said.

“Even worse.” Jin Ling told him vehemently. Lan SiZhui sighed, shaking his head. They’ve strayed far from their original subject. He still wanted to know where they were.

“Right.” Lan SiZhui said. “Let’s try not to think about it. Jin Ling, congratulations on your father’s engagement.” Jin Ling frowned at him.

“Yes. My life is on track now, let’s hope it stays that way, so I’m actually born, so I can throttle Wei WuXian in the future.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. He waited a polite beat, actually forcing himself to count, then turned back to Lan JingYi, who by then sat up properly. “So, what happened?”

“Ah, right. Where was I?”

“I don’t remember, don’t look at me.” Jin Ling scoffed at him.

“You were the one who interrupted me; you ought to know!”

“Why should I?! You were telling the story, it’s not my fault your memory is so full of holes you don’t remember where you left off!”

“You were saying Jin GuangShan interrogated you, but you were not in his Sect...” Lan SiZhui remembered. “Something about the Jiang.” He shrugged.

“Right!” Lan JingYi nodded. “The Jin doesn’t want to offend the Jiang Sect. So, yes, as far as the interrogations went, we got let off easily. We weren’t as closely watched as Jin Ling. He, on the other hand...” He trailed off, looking over at his friend, who huffed, seemingly annoyed.

“It was fine. Jin GuangShan asked for me constantly and had me followed. He even confiscated my letters. It was like the Wen indoctrination all over again, so it wasn’t like I never experienced something like this before. It’s fine.”

“Well, if we don’t count the punishments.” Lan JingYi’s eyebrow twitched. Jin Ling stiffened slightly, then leaned back against the wall.

“I already knew what to expect from the Lan Sect’s brutality.”

“So quick to badmouth others’ Sects...” Lan JingYi shook his head, though Lan SiZhui could see he was not completely carefree about the topic. He suspected there was slightly more to this than the two boys told him, but he didn’t pry. For one, he was the reason this happened in the first place. Secondly, for some reason a memory of the inn in YiLing after they visited the Burial Mounds for the first time came to mind – how he and Jin Ling shared a quiet moment of confidentiality. If this situation was similar, he had no business butting his nose into it. Thirdly, he just wanted to get on with the topic.

“Anyways, it wasn’t as bad.” Jin Ling told them. “Sect Leader Jin is not wrinkly old Grandmaster Lan, he doesn’t rule out fifty strikes with the board.”

Lan SiZhui didn’t point out that that particular punishment was Lan XiChen’s decision.

“Whatever.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes, turning back to Lan SiZhui, who was surprised by this. Normally, Lan JingYi would have no problem continuing a fight like this with Jin Ling, but he was also grateful he didn’t have to sit there and listen to them bickering while Wei WuXian was probably clinging to life not far away. “So, since we decided to try to prevent a battle, or at least lessen the bloodbath as much as we could, we came up with a plan. I now see there were some issues with it, but to be fair, originally we wanted to do this *before* the Sects arrived.

“Eventually we had enough of not being able to send you letters or anything, so we decided to send someone to you with some information. Wei WuXian was the best candidate, or so we thought so at the time, since he was not as closely watched – if the Jiang got tipped off that the Jin were closely watching their head disciple, it would end in disaster for the alliance. Well, that was our theory.” He frowned. “Obviously, something went wrong with it.

“Once we sent Wei WuXian, we prepared to come and execute our plan, which was this: since you were most likely to lash out if the Wen, any of them got hurt during a fight, it would be better if the Sects didn’t even have a chance of doing harm. Originally, we wanted to take you as well, but of course, MouShi pointed out that it would be smart to have you there as proof that the Wen had been there. Throw them off like that.”

Lan SiZhui had a moment of indignation that Jin Ling would use him like that, that if the Sects would not find the Wen, they would either imprison or kill Lan SiZhui, before he realized that would have been exactly what he would have wanted. He would happily sacrifice his life for the remaining little family he had left. He nodded, encouraging Lan JingYi to continue, though he didn’t need the push.

“We originally wanted to take them to Nightless City – we figured that was the first place Jin GuangShan looked for them and he would not return there once he learned they were not there. This was the first bit where our plan went off tracks.” He sighed. “We were careless once again. To be fair, I went over to Jin Ling’s rooms only to have dinner, we weren’t supposed to be talking about our plans. But we got carried away, naturally. We didn’t realize we forgot to put up silencing talismans until someone came inside.”

“What?!” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened. Naturally, his friends were here and fine, so surely whoever found them didn’t punish them severely for plotting like this and realizing the two



boys indeed did know where the Wen were, but the image of a thug entering their rooms and arresting them was sudden and terrifying.

“It turned out to be Jin ZiXuan!” Lan JingYi exclaimed, eyes huge. Lan SiZhui stared at him, slack-mouthed. “Right?! This was my reaction as well, especially after what he said! He said: ‘That wouldn’t work. Father has guards watching the area.’ He came inside, shut the door, applied a silencing talisman, sat down and took a cup of tea!”

“He was so fucking rude!” Jin Ling huffed. “I still can’t believe him.”

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi chided, then turned back to Lan SiZhui. “Of course, he told this to his father as well, and more. Words I do not care to repeat.” He threw a look in Jin Ling’s direction, but the other boy didn’t react, thankfully. “So, he came in, sat down, took a cup of tea and told us not to bother with lies. He wanted to help!”

Lan SiZhui was shocked. “Why?” He asked haltingly and Lan JingYi shrugged.

“I asked him the same. He said... He said something along the lines of wanting the war over, to help his sworn brother and to become his own person. He got a taste of it in the Sunshot Campaign and he liked it.” He shrugged again.

“What happened after?” Lan SiZhui asked, anxious about the rest of the tale.

“Well, naturally, Jin Ling got upset and they argued about the right Jin ZiXuan had to chime in on our plans or even know about them for a while.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “You know how Jin Ling is about these things.”

“Hey!” The other boy exclaimed from his place on the bench, glaring at the Lan. “I’m right here!”

“Of course, you are.” Lan JingYi huffed. “What am I, an idiot to have forgotten this?”

“Right, you are!” Jin Ling said without any shame.

“Hey!” It was Lan JingYi’s turn to look over and glare. Lan SiZhui sighed, not caring about their argument.

“Have you been arguing this whole time?” He asked, not expecting to be heard.

“Of course, we had, he has no self-control whatsoever!” Lan JingYi exclaimed. “That’s all I hear these days! If he isn’t arguing about his wounded pride, he will argue with his father about this; if I tell him to stop arguing, he will argue with me!”

“Like you’re so much better!” Jin Ling countered. “Whine, whine, whine all the time, like a girl!”

“Hey! Who’re you calling a girl, Young Mistress?!”

“I’ll break your legs!”

“So creative, Jin Ling! Haven’t heard that one before!”

“Alright, that’s enough!” Lan SiZhui snapped. At that, his two friends looked over, eyes wide. Lan SiZhui gentled his tone a bit. “JingYi, can you continue, please?”

“Right.” Lan JingYi said, glaring at Jin Ling for a few moments more before continuing. “Right, so after Jin Ling finally shut up, Jin ZiXuan explained that he wanted to help us with our plan. After we’ve discussed that we would not have an easy time getting into Nightless City, we were looking for other places in the area we could come to. Jin ZiXuan told us about this village that had been completely wiped out, due to a lot of cultivators having lived here. It was abandoned and nobody patrolled the area and Jin GuangShan already looked here as well. We figured even if it was abandoned, there might be some stuff left behind, so it would be useful, not just as a shelter but maybe as a place to settle in as well.”

“That’s where we are now?” Lan SiZhui asked, looking around. It didn’t look like a cultivator’s home, but of course, Lan SiZhui usually spent his night-hunts as a guest of the head of the Clan or Sect of the place where they hunted, or at an inn, if there was none. He never entered a local’s house unless his hunts required it. Lan JingYi nodded.

“After we’ve agreed to the place, we’ve decided to act. We wanted to get there and take them away before the Sects arrived. That way, they would be safe sooner and we’d have had a chance to talk to you about this plan, so it wouldn’t come as a surprise. That was the second occasion when our plan went off tracks; by the time we set out to do this, Jin GuangShan announced that he discovered where you were and that the Sects would soon set out to fight you. Naturally, he said they would go there to talk.

“At this point, Jin ZiXuan already told his father he would go on a night-hunt and so he wouldn’t go. Naturally, at the news of your discovery, we panicked and went to Lan XiChen, to inquire if he knew about Jin GuangShan’s plans and to tell him ours. He told us it would be highly suspicious if we both went missing just at this occasion. He suggested one of us go with, so Jin GuangShan didn’t suspect us of anything, while the other executed the plan. Since Jin ZiXuan would not come and Jin Ling would be the worse choice to go to the Burial Mounds with us, we’ve decided it made sense if Jin Ling went with Jin ZiXuan, pretending to accompany him on his night-hunt while I’d accompany Lan XiChen to the battle.

“The only thing we couldn’t predict was where the Wen would be and how to bring them out without anyone noticing. It was Jin Ling’s idea actually – he said if you knew about the attack, you’d probably do what you could to protect the Wen. Since we know the Burial Mounds as much as you, we figured it would be like this; you’d probably want to use resentful energy to counter Jin GuangShan. Because of this, you would probably not want to harm the Wen. The only place where they would be in relative safety would be in the magic circle inside. The problem was, as far as we knew, there were no other entrances to the cave other than through the one we’ve entered...” He trailed off, looking at Lan SiZhui, who thought for a moment, then looked over Jin Ling.

“Wasn’t there another entrance? When we were kidnapped...” He trailed off as well and Lan JingYi nodded with an excited grin.

“Exactly! I remembered as well!” He beamed and Lan SiZhui gave him a smile in return, suspecting Lan JingYi was waiting for praise, not being able to muster more at the moment than the smile. It didn’t seem to bother Lan JingYi. “So, once we figured that out, it was only a matter of Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan being quick to bring the Wen out. While we were discussing with the Sects outside, they actually snuck in and brought the Wen out and brought them here.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui said quietly, looking down. He knew this was the right call and he was very proud of Lan JingYi and Jin Ling for being able to come up with such a clever plan and execute it so successfully. He was, perhaps, a bit mad at them, for plotting behind his back, but at the same time... perhaps he was disappointed in himself. He didn’t want to admit this to anyone, but he had hoped, even if unconsciously, that he expected himself to be able to protect the Wen on his own – that he needn’t to rely on his friends once again to fix the situation for him.

He was stupid and careless, he knew that. Lan SiZhui made a lot of bad decisions lately and it made him feel small and stupid. He remembered the incident at Mo manor, how his arrogance brought so much misery on the Mo Clan. This situation was not so different from that one and Lan SiZhui knew if this ended any other way than it had, he would have to bear this failure as he had the one at Mo Manor. He was still not completely over the shame in that – perhaps he never would be. He accepted the lesson he’d learned and forgave himself, but it still posed as a harsh reminder that his pride was his weakness. His arrogance brought demise on the people he didn’t mean to hurt. Yet, he still hurt them all the same.

“SiZhui.” Jin Ling’s voice brought him out of his musings and he looked up at his friend. “Lan JingYi told me what happened in the Burial Mounds.” He glared at Lan SiZhui pointedly. Lan SiZhui sighed, expecting a lecture, but Jin Ling, uncharacteristically didn’t berate him about the use of resentful energy and he didn’t even bring up Lan SiZhui’s outburst over Wei WuXian. Lan SiZhui wondered if Lan JingYi even told him, but from the look he received, he suspected he had. “What is next?”

Lan SiZhui blinked, taken aback by the lack of lecture and for a few long moments had no idea how to answer.

“I don’t know.” He admitted quietly. “I never expected this to happen.”

“Of course not.” Jin Ling huffed, annoyed. “You never expect what has been proven to you so many times. How many times do people need to follow their nature for you to understand we do not live in the Lan Sect? I know that’s what you grew up in. Actually, seeing the lot of you, even Lan XiChen, I’m starting to think the Lan Sect actually brain-washes their disciples to think the world works by their rules as well. Well, I have news for you, it doesn’t.” He glared at the two of them, then continued,

“How many times do you need your eyes opened to the truth? How many betrayals you have to face before you realize? At first, this naivety was amusing, but it’s getting on my nerves. Wake up already. People are not all righteous. They are selfish and harsh and even if they raised you, cared for you and taught you, they can still hold a string to your neck, ready to kill you just to cover up the fact that they’re murderous animals with only selfish gains in their sight!” By the end, he was standing, his hands in fists.

Lan SiZhui understood his point, yet it left him irritated. Jin Ling was a Young Master of a prominent Sect, yet he told two simple disciples from the Lan Sect that they were being unrealistic in their world view? Although they grew up with the rules of the Lan Sect, it didn't mean they were stupid. Still Lan SiZhui swallowed his pride, clenching his jaw, remembering the strictures. Although he didn't belong to the Lan Sect anymore and didn't need to follow the rules, sometimes it was easier to fall back on them than deal with difficult emotions.

"I'm sorry." Lan SiZhui said simply. Jin Ling huffed and threw himself back on the bench.

"I don't need nor want your sorry, Lan SiZhui. I need you to think for once like you're a real person. You think I'm so smart and Wei WuXian is so smart. We're just not seeing the world through rules and principles like you." He paused, winded, then sighed and continued, a touch softer. "The Sects are probably deciding our fate now, to eliminate us and take the Yin Iron. We cannot let them. The future cannot be repeated. We have to end Jin GuangYao's reign and put it right."

"What, short of a war, do you think could be the solution?" Lan JingYi asked unexpectedly. Jin Ling was quiet at that, looking down. "There are no Yin Iron shards we could look for now. No Wen RuoHan to defeat. We've become the enemy."

"We are not Wen RuoHan." Jin Ling glared at him.

"No." Lan JingYi huffed. "We are the YiLing Patriarch, and we all know how that ended." He looked over the two of them. "Jin Ling. SiZhui. There is no more enemy to fight. Jin GuangYao's plan worked. We're defeated."

"I'm not defeated!" Jin Ling scoffed.

"I'm not sure you even fight the same fight as us though." Lan JingYi glared at him, which had the exact effect Lan SiZhui suspected it would, and Jin Ling jumped on his feet, furious.

"What are you saying?! Did I not let SiZhui go on Qiongqi Path to take the Wen away?! Have I not spent the past weeks coming up with plans to save them?! Am I not here, right in front of you, risking my life, hiding the Wen, hiding *with* the Wen, protecting them?!"

"Yes, but *why*?" Lan JingYi scoffed. "Sure, you're too clingy to leave us alone. I'm with Lan SiZhui because he is my brother and what hurts him hurts me. He is my family, and my place is by him, but why are *you* here?"

Jin Ling just stared for a long time, then he stood. "If you want me to go, just say that."

"I don't want you to go!" Lan JingYi threw up his hands, standing as well. "But you've made sure we understood you hate the Wen and don't want to help them. So, why are you here then? I don't want you to go, I just don't understand you at all!"

"Don't you?!" Jin Ling glared at him now. "I'm doing this because I want to save my father. I'm doing this because unlike what you seem to think of me, I do have a conscience."

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui cautioned as he saw Lan JingYi rearing up to another fight. Lan SiZhui was tired of fights. “It is as Jin Ling says. We’re not defeated – not in the war at least. We lost a battle to Jin GuangYao maybe, but in the end, we won in the future as well.”

“Fine.” Lan JingYi said after a beat. He sat and cautiously, Jin Ling did as well.

“As for what to do now, I have a thought. I’m not sure yet though, so I’ll keep it to myself for now. Let us just think about it while we recuperate from the recent fight.”

“Alright.” Lan JingYi nodded with a sigh.



Lan SiZhui rested for the rest of the day. It was just as well, he couldn’t visit Wei WuXian anyways. Wen Ning returned at some point with some healing draught he had cooked up in the meantime and updated him; apparently, nobody was permitted to visit Wei WuXian. Lan WangJi woke from his forced rest earlier and had been posing outside. Wei WuXian had not awoken since they’d brought him here. Lan SiZhui was worried, but with Wen Qing caring for him, he was sure she was doing everything to make sure he was alright.

The next day passed calmly. He ventured out of the shack he was placed in, and for the first time, he really took in the village they were in. It was better than the Burial Mounds – not a high standard to break – and some food was left in the homes, though many of it went bad already, there was enough to get by. Lan SiZhui talked to some Wen, and they all seemed grateful for the rescue, not complaining at all. They figured if they were to stay longer, they could grow food for themselves, but it being the winter, they couldn’t now.

Lan SiZhui was just chatting with Wen Li, when Wen Qing showed her face for the first time since Lan SiZhui arrived. She walked up to him with confident strides, her face set hard but clearly not angry. As she approached, Lan SiZhui excused himself from the conversation and turned to her, awaiting the news eagerly. He needn’t to wait long, for the first words she said had been:

“SiZhui, he’s awake.” Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened and he was ready to rush in – he had vague memories of which house Wei WuXian had been taken when they arrived – but she stopped him short with a look. “Lan WangJi is already with him. He’s babbling nonsense, so he’ll be fine.” She scoffed and Lan SiZhui repressed a grin.

“Can I visit him?” He asked.

“You may.” She told him. “But first, we must talk.”

“About what?” He frowned.

“Surely, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi already told you about my diagnosis.”

“About Wei WuXian?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused. She huffed.

“About yours, SiZhui.” Ah, that. Lan SiZhui looked away.

“It’s fine.”

“‘It’s fine’?!” She glared at him and Lan SiZhui sighed.

“Wen Qing, what can any of us do about this?” He asked pointedly. She continued glaring. “Then there’s no point talking about it.”

“So, you just accept your fate and wait for your death?!” She snapped. “There are ways to...” She trailed off, uncharacteristically mellow. Lan SiZhui sighed again.

“I’m sure there are ways to manage it. Stop using resentful energy, *Cleansing* regularly, maybe go to meditate in the Cold Pond Cave for the rest of my life.” He paused. “We’re fighting for our lives. You may not want to include me in the Clan, that’s fine, but I’m going to stay and fight for the Wen, because you’re my family, no matter what you say or do.” It was his turn to glare. “So, no, I’m not going to stop using our most powerful weapon against them and I’m not going into Cold Pond Cave.” To this, Wen Qing said nothing. After a beat, Lan SiZhui continued. “As I said, it’s fine. I don’t feel the effects, so I’m not going to go crazy as Wen RuoHan had. I’m going to ensure the safety and the future of my family first – then, I will listen to your advice. I expect you to survive this, so you can guide me once this is over.”

Wen Qing was really quiet for a long time and Lan SiZhui actually started wondering if he went too far. In the end, Wen Qing pressed her lips together and said softly: “You think I don’t want you to stay because I don’t see you as family. In reality, you did more for me than my family ever had. This is why I don’t want you to die. But fine. If you’re like this and don’t want to hear about this anymore, I’m not going to mention it either. But don’t think just because you don’t feel the effects, the resentful energy doesn’t affect you.”

“I’m confident in your diagnosis.” Lan SiZhui told her. “I’m not denying it.”

“That’s not what I meant. You might not feel its effects, but SiZhui, the rest of us do see it on you.” She told him, then turned away. “Come on.” She said emotionlessly, all the previous gentleness gone from her tone, and began to lead him towards the building where Wei WuXian was. Lan SiZhui pondered on her words for a little. In the end, he said:

“I’m sorry about how harsh I was, back in the Burial Mounds.” He told her, testing her mood. She huffed, shook her head, but otherwise didn’t address him. “We should be safe for a little while here.”

“For a little while.” She agreed, or at least Lan SiZhui thought so until her next words. “And then what? We keep running away, hiding like scattered rats after heavy rain?” Her tone was unpleasant, displeased. Lan SiZhui ducked his head.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do better.”

“Why would you need to do better?” She whirled on him, glaring. “Didn’t you do just enough?!”

“Wen Qing...” Lan SiZhui sighed, tired of this argument. She huffed and turned, storming inside the house. Lan SiZhui hesitated for a moment, then followed. Once inside, it took a moment for his eyes to get used to the darkness of the room. He heard Wei WuXian before he saw him, which was not out of the ordinary.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, serve this poor injured cultivator!” He whined. Lan SiZhui didn’t hear an answer, and as he looked, he also saw Lan WangJi sitting at a low table, his guqin out and glancing sideways at Wei WuXian in annoyance before turning back to his guqin. Looking over, Lan SiZhui noted Wei WuXian’s state, relieved to hear him talking, but the fear he’d felt after he saw Wei WuXian collapse after Madam Yu’s attack was still there.

Wei WuXian looked slight and fragile. He was pale and sweaty, but he was sitting up and his eyes shone clearly. He was lying in a bed similar to Lan SiZhui’s in only his dark red underrobes, bandages peeking out from under them.

“Wei WuXian, did I say you can sit up?!” Wen Qing snapped, glaring at him as she stopped on the end of the room. She was definitely mad because of their fight, but Lan SiZhui let her be. She would likely not treat Wei WuXian better in a better mood either, so there was no point trying to console her. Wei WuXian’s eyes flitted over to her briefly, before returning to Lan WangJi, who was just finishing a gentle score of *Cleansing*.

“Brother Wei.” Lan SiZhui stepped forward, and Wei WuXian’s head snapped in his direction, looking at him with wide eyes, mouth opening slightly. “How are you feeling?” He asked with a small smile, glad to see him sitting up, awake, not bleeding anymore.

“Ah, SiZhui!” He gaped. “You’re here!”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, lowering his gaze. Perhaps Wei WuXian thought Lan SiZhui wouldn’t dare show his face, after all, this whole thing was his fault. He understood. He tried to make up for it by saying: “Brother Wei, I’m sorry to have put you in such a danger. It was never my intention...”

“Ah, SiZhui, no!” Wei WuXian said quickly, dismissing his apology. “Whatever happened, I’m sure it wasn’t your fault. I’m just glad you’re back!” He grinned. Lan SiZhui looked up at him, confused. Back? Oh. Understanding drawn on him and he felt even more ashamed.

He assumed that after he collapsed, Wei WuXian was dead, so he didn’t think he saw the state Lan SiZhui was in after his collapse. Perhaps he was wrong, he realized, Wei WuXian must’ve seen him lash out so harshly and full of himself. He lowered his eyes, ashamed, and that was the moment Jin Ling and Lan JingYi came through the door.

“So, you’re awake then.” Jin Ling said, looking at Wei WuXian with a frown.

“Jin Ling! JingYi!” Wei WuXian beamed, happy. “You’re here, too!”

“Yes, well.” Jin Ling glared. “It seems like we can’t get rid of you so easily.”

“Jin Ling, your humor is still the same!” Wei WuXian grinned at him. Was that a tear in his eye?

“Who’s trying to be funny?! How many times have I told you; I don’t like you!”

“You never said that!”

“Of course, I did! JingYi, tell him!” He turned to the other. Lan SiZhui was starting to get a headache from their arguing.

“Did you just come here to argue?!” Wen Qing snapped, seemingly on the same opinion as Lan SiZhui. Wei WuXian’s head twitched her way, though he didn’t look at her, but quickly back to the boys. He was already opening his mouth to say something, however, Jin Ling spoke before him.

“Like we’re the ones with short temperaments here!” Jin Ling told her. At this, Wei WuXian’s eyes widened and looked over at Wen Qing, back at the boys, then Wen Qing again. Surely, he was looking for what reaction this brought out of Wen Qing, but she didn’t even get mad.

“If you can’t behave, I’ll have you escorted out.” Wen Qing told Jin Ling.

“Right.” Lan SiZhui said, when neither answered. He turned back to Wei WuXian. “Brother Wei, how are you feeling?”

“Ah, SiZhui, this is nothing!” He smiled gently. “I’m just happy to see you three again.”

“Sentimental fool.” Jin Ling grumbled under his nose, but Lan SiZhui didn’t care much about him, turning to Wen Qing instead.

“How is he, really?” He asked her.

“Since the blow was spiritual in nature, it was a little uncertain for a while.” She said, looking over Wei WuXian. “It was even questionable if he was going to wake up at all. His heart stopped multiple times, but the most dangerous was probably the one during surgery. I was able to restart it, so it’s fine for now. I believe he will recover, but to be safe, I’ll require everyone with their spiritual powers intact to transfer him energy three times a day for a while.”

“Is that really necessary?” Jin Ling frowned, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Would you he rather die?” Lan JingYi glared at him.

“No, but I also don’t want to spend hours sitting next to him, listening to his nonsense!”

“Ah, Jin Ling, must you be so mean?” Wei WuXian looked back at him with his own frown. “It’s really unbecoming of you – didn’t your uncle teach you better?”

“What do you know about my uncle, huh?!” Jin Ling glared at him. “See, this is why I don’t want to share a space with him!”

“It’s not like Second Young Master Lan won’t be here the entire time.” Lan JingYi said, rolling his eyes at Jin Ling.



“I don’t care if he’s here, he will likely just sit in silence and meditate anyways.”

“Don’t insult Hanguang-Jun, especially while he’s right here!” Lan JingYi told him. “You truly are too much, Jin Ling!”

“Ugh. Whatever.” Jin Ling huffed.

“If you’re finished...” Lan SiZhui cut in. All five in the room turned to look at him. “We don’t have much time and with brother Wei injured, I don’t know if you and Hanguang-Jun should stay.”

“And where are they supposed to go?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue.

“How about Lotus Pier?” Lan JingYi asked. “Surely, the doctor there can help.”

“How about not sending him to the place where the person who stabbed him lives?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Ah, Jin Ling, it’s alright!” Wei WuXian perked up suddenly. “I’m not mad!”

“You may not be.” Jin Ling glowered.

“Oh.” Wei WuXian pursed his lips. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Yes.” He glared. “I usually am.”

“Alright, not Lotus Pier, then where?” Lan JingYi asked, looking around the room for anyone who seemed to have an idea.

“Cloud Recesses.” Lan WangJi said. “Brother would help.”

“Who is the healer there?” Wen Qing asked. Jin Ling frowned at her.

“Why is that relevant?”

“I know Master Hua’s work. I have only heard of the Lan healer’s from their patient.” She said matter of fact. Wei WuXian looked over at her briefly.

“Ah, Master Hua! Hua Qing, right? I almost forgot about them.” He smiled small, then his eyebrows drew together. “How do you know their work?”

“Wei WuXian, don’t be daft. You watched me and A-Ning meet them. I know you did, you were drinking with someone in the market and tried very hard to pretend you weren’t looking at us.”

“Ah...” Wei WuXian frowned. “Now, that you mention it, I do seem to remember some Wen talking to Hua Qing all that time ago... Ah, I didn’t know it was you two though!”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes.

“The Lan doctor is...” Lan JingYi began confidently, then his voice grew quieter. He looked over at Lan SiZhui in panic. Lan SiZhui looked back at him, not knowing either, though he didn’t panic about it.

“Liu LiXin.” Lan WangJi told her. “He uses the character for Liu, for standing, and for new.”

“Mn.” Wen Qing nodded. “I’ve heard of him. If he was the one to treat Lan SiZhui, he was in good hands.” She told them.

“It’s not like it matters.” Wei WuXian said. “We’re not going back to Cloud Recesses.”

“So stubborn!” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “We already said, you’re injured, it’s not like you could be of much help!”

“I could heal!” Wei WuXian insisted. “This Golden Core is really strong!”

“What this Golden Core, it is your Golden Core. And of course it’s strong.” Jin Ling huffed.

“Ah, Jin Ling! You’re making me blush!” Wei WuXian grinned, but unlike what he said, he was not blushing. “I’ll just stay and heal, so you don’t need to send us away.”

“If we send you away, it is our right, wasn’t it you who shamelessly involved himself in our business?” Jin Ling scoffed. “Besides, the Sects could be here at any minute, so when will you have time to heal?”

“You truly think the Sects will come so soon?” Wen Qing asked, frowning. Jin Ling shrugged.

“With Lan SiZhui’s presentation in the Burial Mounds, who can be sure? But I’m confident they will not leave this subject rest, especially with the Yin Iron in play once again. I’m sure if nothing else, my uncle wants this.”

“How do we know this is what your uncle wants?” She asked back.

At this, the three of them looked at each other. Should they tell Wen Qing about this, or not? Also, Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi both knew now, who Jin Ling’s paternal uncle was they were talking about. Jin Ling crossed his arms across his chest.

“We just know. And that’s not the point – the point is, the Sects are coming. We should prepare and fight, not concern ourselves with Wei WuXian’s healing process. With Lan SiZhui having done what he did, he had not only turned his back to the cultivation world, but also angered them. Retaliation is unavoidable.”

“What does that mean?” Wen Qing asked, tensing. “Another war?”

Jin Ling snorted, humorless. “Using the word ‘war’ implies we have a chance against the four Sects.” He paused, looked to Lan SiZhui then sighed, rolling his eyes. “I assume you haven’t heard from your brother yet?” Looking over at Lan WangJi, who shook his head, wordlessly. “Right. Anyhow, we can all assume that the Sects have returned to Lanling and

are going to have a discussion over this. This saves us little time, but we still need to act soon; I'm sure we cannot hide here forever."

There was a pause when nobody said anything, then Lan JingYi turned to Lan SiZhui.

"SiZhui, earlier, you said you had a thought of how to get out of this situation." Lan SiZhui flustered, but by now, all of them were looking at him expectantly, so he had no choice but to say the thought that popped into his head earlier. Sighing, Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, then explained:

"My thought is... With the revelation of the Yin Iron shard, we actually have an advantage over the whole situation. A bargaining chip." He paused, looking up at the disapproving stares and was quick to say: "I know, I know you wouldn't want me to do this. This is why I said to think about other ways first, I didn't want to say just yet; but I also realize this is probably our best chance to win."

"How so?" Jin Ling frowned. Lan SiZhui could tell he wanted to say more, but he didn't, for which Lan SiZhui was grateful.

"We have the Yin Iron shard, which the Sects want. We also have the Wen, whom the Sects want. If we trade the Yin Iron shard for the Wen, we might win on both fronts. We could make demands; I would bring the Yin Iron shard over, in exchange, the Wen would be left alone."

"And leave the shard in my uncle's hands?" Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui sighed, looking pointedly at their audience.

"It doesn't necessarily need to be left in their hands though, is it?" Lan JingYi asked, looking around.

"What, so you agree with this stupid plan?" Jin Ling glared at him and Lan JingYi sighed.

"No, I'm not. But you have to admit there is logic to it. You ought to know this, MouShi." He paused, then continued. "As for the shard, as I said, it doesn't necessarily need to stay with them. We could twist this deal in this way; Lan SiZhui offers to heal those who got affected by it, then destroys the shard. In exchange, they leave the Wen alone."

Lan SiZhui looked around the room to see the reactions. Wei WuXian was frowning deeply, looking down at his lap, playing with the edge of his robes. Lan SiZhui, figuring he was in pain, sighed and stepped forward.

"We still have a little time to decide what actions to take. This is just one plan, although I do think this would cause the least bloodshed and the least complications, we still haven't thought of others yet, so we should... take a little time to think this through." He looked over at Wen Qing. "I know you are worried and I promise we will do anything to protect you and yours, cousin." Wen Qing didn't answer, just looking at him for a long time.

"Brother Wei, we will leave you to rest now. We hope you feel better soon." Lan SiZhui told him. Wei WuXian looked over at him and smiled faintly, nodding to him. With this, the three

of them left the house, stepping outside into the busy streets of the village.

“I hope you know how fucking stupid your plan is.” Jin Ling said, barely waiting a moment.

“I know.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “But what other choice do we have?”

At this, Jin Ling huffed, annoyed, then turned and stormed off in an unknown direction. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look.

“He knows it is our best chance.” Lan JingYi said. “But I also agree. It is extremely risky.”

“I know.”

“We will figure something else out.”

“I know.” He smiled at Lan JingYi. With this, they also parted.

## Despair IV.

The atmosphere between the three was mildly tense in the following days. Lan SiZhui didn't know how to console his friends, but he also wanted to stop fighting and figuring out their next step. They just needed a plan better than Lan SiZhui's. There wasn't one.

Lan SiZhui went over this in his head several times. The Jin Sect was all but in title the new chief cultivator's Sect, which meant going against them would go against the cultivation world, unless every other Sect joined together and fought them as happened to the Wen. This was no good option; the Jiang Sect was closely allied with them, especially with the news of the marriage. The Jiang Sect, while often overlooked and underestimated, was an intimidating force, one the Lan and Nie Sect could not be able to take up arms against. Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue were both strong Sect Leaders, but also young. Faced with the seasoned Sect Leaders of Jin and Jiang, they had small chances.

It also didn't help that the Nie Sect was still much a grey area for Lan SiZhui. Nie MingJue seemed reluctant to take sides, but at the same time, everyone knew the Nie Sect hated demonic cultivation the most of all the major Sects.

Sending away Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi was not a bad idea and Lan SiZhui thought they should, whether the two wanted it or not. They would be safe in the Cloud Recesses and well taken care of. For now, nobody even knew Wei WuXian had a shard of his own excluding present company. If Wei WuXian took to battle beside Lan SiZhui, he could potentially reveal his ownership and with that, he would also become a hatred person in the Cultivation world – besides the past would surely repeat itself somehow.

There was really no other plan to have. They wouldn't give up the Yin Iron shard and they would not let the Wen face the Sects either – what, other than hiding, could they do?

Waiting was the worst in all this. While Lan SiZhui didn't mind the peace and quiet, he also had the foreboding feeling of something bad coming and was afraid of it. The past had distorted so much during their time here, he didn't know what to expect anymore. Lan SiZhui sometimes wished Lan JingYi never took him away – wished they could've ended this situation in the Burial Mounds. At least, then, it would be over, though Lan SiZhui was a little affronted with the direction this thought took him – did he truly wish he would've killed those people in the Burial Mounds?

As the next day approached, they were still no closer to a solution, and so, they waited. Another day passed, then another – and still, the Sects wouldn't come. The Wen in the meantime visibly relaxed. It wasn't that they didn't know danger was coming, but they were almost fully in winter now and so they had more pressing matters. The elders were cold in the run-down buildings and the young people were hungry from the lack of food. It wasn't like they could grow their own foods, it was too late for that by the time they got to the Burial Mounds and it was definitely too late now here as well.

As for the housing situation at least, they could do something about it. Wen Han, the carpenter who took it upon himself to orchestrate building the houses in the Burial Mounds, it was also him this time who took it upon himself to help others proof their houses against the cold. Many houses' roofs were damaged and in some places the walls had holes in them as well, so those people who had a problem like this went to Wen Han to help them out.

This resulted in almost the same setup they've founded in the Burial Mounds. Young men went and did whatever Wen Han guided them to do. This occupied the young men and Wen Han also, so like this they didn't have to be so cooped up.

While he went and sometimes helped Wen Han out as well, just to do something, he scarcely saw Jin Ling or Lan JingYi. He asked Wen Ning about this once. Then, Wen Ning said Jin Ling was practicing the bow and Lan JingYi was studying some texts he brought with himself.

A few days into their stay, Lan SiZhui was surprised it was actually the two of them who approached him. They seemed to be in a neutral mood, they were not overly happy, nor were they devastated. Jin Ling was annoyed, but he was usually annoyed, so there was nothing new to this.

"SiZhui, let's talk." He said. Lan SiZhui raised his eyebrows but nodded.

"How about having dinner at yours?" Lan JingYi asked and Lan SiZhui also agreed to this. A few hours later, the two boys knocked on Lan SiZhui's door, who opened it and let them inside with the food. There wasn't much. They've been eating some watered down vegetable soup in the past few days, so that was on the menu as well. Lan SiZhui made a note to ask the Wen about their food situation. If they ran out, the four Sects needn't to come, they'd die of starvation.

They sat to eat, but didn't talk just enjoyed having a meal together again. This was nostalgic – Lan SiZhui suspected from now on, whenever the three of them were going to have a meal together, he would always associate it with having come back to the past and planning their next moves in various places. It was also a little interesting, Lan SiZhui thought, if he would only remember these shared meals, he would easily be able to tell their whole story. This felt like these events were important, and that they handled them like adults. They have truly grown up since they've arrived.

"So, I was thinking." Jin Ling began, the moment he finished his soup. Usually, they would follow their meal with a tea and converse during drinking that, but there was no such thing in this place, or more accurately, the tea they have found in the village was handed over to older people to keep them warm, so they didn't have any. It was strange to plan without some, but they had to make do from what they had.

"Young Mistress, you should leave such matters to people who know what they're doing." Lan JingYi said and Lan SiZhui was confused – did he zone out and miss a piece of conversation? Although soon he had to realize that was not the case – Lan JingYi was simply making a jab at Jin Ling again.

“You...!” Jin Ling inhaled, glaring at Lan JingYi. “Make up your mind already! Am I MouShi because I plot all the time or am I too stupid to think?! Decide already what you’re going to tease me about, teasing me about both makes you look stupid!”

“I don’t care what I tease you about though, all that matters is that you’re insulted!”

“You—!” Jin Ling raised his hand as if to beat Lan JingYi. Lan SiZhui sighed and Jin Ling actually looked over at him, glaring, then let his hand drop. “So, what I was thinking about was this: The Sects are coming for us sooner rather than later. They either find us here or we hide from the world.” He paused. “Since we have no means to really hide, we only have a few choices. The Wen could scatter. If we don’t travel as a big group, they could build a life for themselves individually somewhere.”

“I thought of that as well.” Lan JingYi nodded, seemingly having forgotten all about their bickering at once. Good, Lan SiZhui was pleased they were showing signs that they can have some self-control and not argue at any given moment. He was tired of having to manage the two of them. “I don’t know about that. Wen Qing’s pride would not likely let her just hide and live a normal life. Her Clan had been wronged and she wants people to acknowledge that. Besides, her and Wen Ning – even if the others could get away without anyone recognizing them – they’re rather known. How would they hide then?”

“Yes, which is the issue with this plan. She also most likely has followers in this sense as well.” Jin Ling glanced over at Lan SiZhui. “SiZhui would know this best, since he knows these people best.”

“And it still doesn’t solve the issue of the Yin Iron.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling scoffed at Lan JingYi. “I’m aware.” He paused again. “Another choice is to ally ourselves with another Sect.”

“I’ve already thought of this.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “The Jiang Sect, even if they weren’t at odds internally, they’re now closely tied with the Jin Sect once again, so we definitely cannot approach them. The Nie Sect is very much an uncertain point now. Nie MingJue had been favorable towards us in the past, which is why I don’t think he agrees with Jin GuangShan entirely, but at the same time, he also hates the Wen and despises demonic cultivation, so he is at crossroads. I don’t think asking him to choose a path would go down well.”

“And the Lan Sect?”

“While I have no doubt Lan XiChen would help us, they’re also the ones who sustained the worst of the war’s effects. At this point if anyone was to oppose them, they wouldn’t have a hard time with this. Besides, not everyone sees the Jin Sect as the enemy. A war could not break out over this.”

“Right, but this is not what I mean.” Jin Ling said, shifting uncomfortably. “Look, what you said, about the Yin Iron being a bargaining chip, it was not completely stupid. But you’re thinking of handing it and yourself over to the Jin Sect. With my uncle there, who’s to say

what they're going to do to you, once they have you? That part, that is stupid indeed." He nodded. "But if you hand yourself over to a Sect you trust..."

"You're proposing I bring the Lan Sect into this." Lan SiZhui glared at him, feeling angry. He had parted from his Sect so he didn't drag them into this mess in the first place, so he could disassociate them from the situation. It was not a decision he made lightly or happily. It was, in fact, one of the toughest decision he ever had to make. With this proposal, Jin Ling was dismissing everything he had been trying to do since he left the Cloud Recesses. "Didn't I just tell you how dangerous it would be for them?"

"Didn't you just say you already thought about siding with one of the Sects? What's your issue then? Besides, it doesn't have to be them. Heaven knows, the old sags would punish you severely once you've served your purpose, and besides, Lan XiChen doesn't have enough pull to stop Jin GuangShan from taking you off their hands. You could go to the YunmengJiang Sect—"

"Where Madam Yu wants him dead, and they're allied to the Jin Sect via marriage?" Lan JingYi asked, sighing. "Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui just told you why we can't ally ourselves with the Sects."

"Don't sound so angry about this. I'm trying to come up with a plan." Jin Ling frowned at him. "Anyways, these are also options we should be thinking about. Another thing I was considering is this; when you fought the Four Sects, you were also trying to protect the Wen. I was thinking... These people are farmers and healers mostly, right? They do not know how to fight. If they knew how to fight, wouldn't they have more chance to survive?"

"Elders and young people – how would they know how to fight?" Lan SiZhui asked, confused.

"That's my point!" Jin Ling said, slapping his hand on the table for emphasis. "If we teach them how to fight, wouldn't they benefit from it?"

"*You* want to teach them how to fight?" Lan SiZhui asked skeptically. Jin Ling looked at him with a frown, a flash of something akin hurt crossing his expression before he schooled it.

"Well, it's not like any of us have anything better to do, isn't it?"

"I suppose." Lan SiZhui said, though he was not convinced. He understood the need to do something, but he hardly thought that the Wen would need to fight. They were not cultivators, most of them. Even if they learned how to fight, they would not be a match to any of the Four Sects' cultivators. Still, Jin Ling was right, it wasn't like any of them, including most of the Wen, had anything better to do. There were the ones who helped Wen Han and those that helped with the food, but it still left many people without anything to do – not like they needed to do anything. They were refugees, there was no need to work.

Still, it would probably be nice to offer them a chance to at least do something, even if they never end up fighting. Lan SiZhui admitted that was at least a good idea to do, even if he still disagreed that the Wen would need to learn how to fight.



Lan JingYi asked Jin Ling about what he was thinking about teaching them and Lan SiZhui left the two of them discuss this, not caring about the topic much. They stayed for a little while, then Jin Ling left. Before Lan JingYi left, he helped Lan SiZhui put the room in order.

“He’s just trying to help, you know.” He mentioned. Lan SiZhui frowned.

“I know.”

“It’s just, you were really quick to shut him down on both fronts.” Lan SiZhui turned to his friend, slightly annoyed.

“JingYi, you bicker all the time and you criticize him constantly. Am I not allowed to do the same? Besides, wasn’t it him who told us to start thinking realistically? No matter who I go to with the shard, the Jin will always get to me, so there’s really no point talking about that. And do you really think a bunch of farmers and healers, not even cultivators, will fight the Four Sects?”

“It’s not that you weren’t right!” Lan JingYi argued. “It’s just that you barely even listened to him.”

“He barely listens to me all the time.” Lan SiZhui told him, truly frustrated now.

“Yes, but he’s like that.” Lan JingYi frowned at him. “You’re not like this at all.”

To this, Lan SiZhui couldn’t say anything, so he just returned to his task. Soon after Lan JingYi also left.

“You must be tired, I’ll get going.”

“What makes you think that?” Lan SiZhui wondered. Lan JingYi watched him for a long moment, then produced a strained smile.

“Then it must be me who’s tired.” He said. “Good night, SiZhui.”

“Good night.” Lan SiZhui nodded to him. After he left, Lan SiZhui also went to bed. It was true, he was tired. As soon as his body hit the hard, uncomfortable, lumpy mattress, he was asleep.



As the weeks passed without the Sects coming or word from Lan XiChen, Lan SiZhui felt more and more tense. Jin Ling made good on his idea and began training the Wen – Lan SiZhui figuring he might’ve offended Jin Ling the other night, offered to ask around who would be interested in learning, and Lan JingYi helped out as well. They choose a spot just outside the village – it was a small clearing with a hill to the side. Some people being very enthusiastic about the idea even got together and collected fabric and straw to make targets, which they set up on the clearing.

Jin Ling even found two hunting bows in the village, though they didn’t really have any other weapons other than knives from kitchens and one spiritual sword someone must’ve left

behind when they left the village – one of the Wen found it in a trunk in their chosen hut. This, the Wen arguing over about whether to use the sword or not, reminded Lan SiZhui of Feixu.

He wondered where the sword – his family's sword – was now. He remembered faintly Wen Ning using it during the fight in the Wen village, but he hadn't heard of nor seen the weapon since then. Not even Wen Qing had her sword; the Jin must've taken them when they arrested them. This saddened Lan SiZhui – he actually wondered what it would be like for little A-Yuan to grow up with a heritage such as Feixu. It was more than a fine sword and Lan SiZhui grew fond of it, without even knowing this sword actually belonged to his family once. Knowing he had a family sword all this time made him feel a pang of something regarding the future – he was not angry at the Lan for taking him, nor at Wei WuXian for taking him away from Qiongqi long ago. But he also couldn't say he was comfortable with that he knew absolutely nothing about his roots in the future.

It wasn't like he blamed Hanguang-Jun for not telling him. It was completely understandable. When he was traveling with Wen Ning, the Ghost General talked a little bit about their family. He told Lan SiZhui that his parents were not with him in the Burial Mounds, that they died before that. Other than that, he knew no more. The Wen never talked to his infant self about his parents and at that time, Lan SiZhui felt too detached from his Wen side, he never asked the Ghost General about them in detail. Him and Wen Ning mostly talked about their time with the YiLing Patriarch back then, and also mostly about what life Lan SiZhui had since being taken to the Lan. Lan SiZhui now suspected the topic of family was too painful for Wen Ning.

He had a thought, that if they survived this fight with the Sects, he would try to find Feixu, just so he could then pass it to whoever was taking care of A-Yuan, to make sure this version of himself didn't grow up without knowing who he was. Yingjiu was Lan SiZhui's sword, gifted to him by Hanguang-Jun when he turned thirteen – it was the same grade of sword that the Lan family also carried, masterly made and tailored to his spiritual energies. Lan SiZhui loved his sword with all his heart, even if now he couldn't use it - but he couldn't stop thinking about how different it would have been to have a sword that was in use for generations before him. To have a sword with a history, that, if he ever had children, would also carry with themselves, knowing they were not just carrying a sword but a legacy as well.

After all, both his friends had their family swords, even if Lan JingYi didn't use his. Jin Ling had Suihua, which was his father's sword. Lan JingYi's father, Lan ChenGuang also had a sword named QingTian. It was named after the idiom 'thunder from a clear sky'. Lan JingYi didn't use this, in fact, he kept it in the ancestral hall of his hometown after his parents passed away. It did not belong there, but Su ZhuoXuan, his mother was also a Su Clan disciple and Lan JingYi thought his parents' spirit belonged to each other, so they should rest together, even in death. He did not use the sword because at the time he did not feel he was worthy. When he turned thirteen, Lan XiChen offered to have someone sent for QingTian, but in the end, Lan JingYi convinced him to have one made for him instead. Zhameng suited him better anyways, with his goofy personality.

With the two of them being busy in the training grounds, Lan SiZhui didn't really know what to do. He was no good for training – for one, Lan JingYi was a very fine swordsman as it was

his strongest cultivation, although by now, talisman-making was surely close as well, and Jin Ling taught the Wen with the bow. He didn't even want to help all that much anyways. Wen Han and the other Wen thought he was still injured and insisted he rest, not help with the construction as he had in the Burial Mounds.

It was now roughly two weeks past since they've arrived to the village. Lan JingYi and Jin Ling had gone to the healer's hut several times since to transfer spiritual energy to Wei WuXian, and by what Wen Ning told Lan SiZhui, it had helped – and naturally, Lan SiZhui also went to see for himself. Wei WuXian had not left the healer's hut so far, though it was not for the lack of will. Lan SiZhui had visited him twice, since they've talked when he woke up. Both times he was acting very strange. The first time Lan SiZhui went was the day after Jin Ling presented his ideas over dinner.

Wen Qing was out, so was Wen Ning, so it was only Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian in the hut. As Lan SiZhui entered, Lan WangJi looked up from where he had been plucking the strings of his guqin, seemingly not playing any particular notes. Wei WuXian was sitting up, his chest partially exposed, the bandages around his middle peeking out from his underrobes. He was just sitting there, playing with Chenqing in his lap, seemingly just to occupy himself with something. Neither men were speaking. When Lan SiZhui entered, Wei WuXian also looked over, his expression stretching into an uncertain smile.

“Ah, SiZhui, you came to visit!” He said cheerfully, though the same uncertainty that was in his expression also translated into his tone as well. Lan SiZhui didn't know what to make of it.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui smiled back at him. “How are you feeling, brother Wei?”

“Ah, addressing me so casually, it warms my heart, SiZhui!” This was strange, since it was Wei WuXian who demanded him not address him formally, but he just shrugged. “I'm fine, SiZhui! You know me, right? Even if I get whipped with Zidian, I'm fine!”

“Ah, brother Wei, when were you whipped with Zidian?” Lan SiZhui asked, curious. He didn't know much about Wei WuXian and Madam Yu's relationship, but he did know it was not the best on good days. He also knew that Madam Yu had no issue using the spiritual tool to rule out punishment on the Jiang disciples, so it must be it, but still, Lan SiZhui was curious.

“Ah, SiZhui, you don't remember?” Wei WuXian frowned. Lan SiZhui also frowned, trying to think back. Other than the time in the future when Wei WuXian came back in Mo XuanYu's body, he could not recall any instances when Wei WuXian might've been whipped. Although, he did say, during the war when Lotus Pier was taken, the Lady Wang LingJiao wanted him whipped and his hand cut off.

“Ah, was this when Lady Wang LingJiao was at Lotus Pier? You said that she wanted you whipped and your hand cut off. Ah, brother Wei, remember, at the time we were looking for Wen Chao with Jin Ling, we weren't there.” Lan SiZhui told him, finding it strange that he had to remind Wei WuXian to that. Though the other man's memory had always been a little holey.

“Ah...” Wei WuXian looked around the room somewhat puzzled. “Right, right. At that time. You weren’t there, of course...”

“Ah, should I leave you to rest?” Lan SiZhui frowned. Was Wei WuXian truly alright?

“No, no...” Wei WuXian frowned at him. Then, from the side, Lan WangJi spoke up.

“Wei Ying’s memories are damaged.”

“Huh?” Lan SiZhui blinked at him, while Wei WuXian turned to him with another frown.

“Lan Zhan, it’s not that. I just confuse things sometimes. It’s not like I forgot everything!”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi said, looking at him for a long moment, then returning his attention to his guqin.

“It’s fine, really, SiZhui.” Wei WuXian turned back to him with a reassuring smile. Still, this left Lan SiZhui feeling guilty. If he didn’t drag Wei WuXian into this mess in the first place, he wouldn’t be in this situation either. Suddenly, he wanted to leave the room.

“Ah, excuse me. Jin Ling proposed we teach the Wen to fight some. I ought to ask around who wants to join.” He bowed. “I’ll be going now.”

“SiZhui?” Wei WuXian looked at him with a worried expression, but Lan SiZhui just smiled at him and left.

Lan SiZhui didn’t want to make this a lie, so he did as told, talked to some Wen about the training. Those who were interested, he told to go to Jin Ling and inquire about the details there. He didn’t want to participate in this more than that. Besides his own weakness, he was reluctant to teach these people to fight. They were just regular people who had nothing to do with the issues cultivators were having, and yet they were also dragged into this fight. Besides, he had hardly even taken up his sword since losing his spiritual energies. He didn’t know how he would be able to help, so he didn’t.

The next time he went to visit Wei WuXian, was a few days after that. Lan WangJi wasn’t actually in the room this time, having been asked and accepted Jin Ling’s proposal of helping him with the training. Although the sword practice was Lan JingYi’s job, Lan WangJi was actually a master martial artist as well, so he helped the Wen with some more ordinary moves as well.

Lan SiZhui entered the room, where Wei WuXian was not in bed but sitting in the window instead, playing a gentle, familial tune on his flute. It was not a spiritual tune, at least not one Lan SiZhui recognized. However, before he could figure out what tune it actually was, Wei WuXian noticed him and quickly ceased his play, smiling at Lan SiZhui.

“Brother Wei, are you supposed to be out of bed?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“Ah, Wen Qing didn’t say I was not supposed to be out of bed.” He shrugged. This tricky thinking reassured Lan SiZhui and he smiled, coming closer.

“How are you then?”

“Better, thank you.” He smiled, turning fully towards Lan SiZhui. “SiZhui, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Unfortunately, at that moment, Wen Ning entered behind Lan SiZhui, carrying a bowl of the same bland soup they’ve been eating for weeks now.

“Lan SiZhui! You’re here!”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him, then turned back to Wei WuXian. “Brother Wei, what was it you wanted to ask?”

“Ah, it doesn’t matter!” Wei WuXian coughed and looked away.

“Young Master Wei, I brought you food. Unfortunately, this time I couldn’t save you the juicier pieces.” Wen Ning said, placing the bowl carefully onto the table. “My sister said she was going to cook you a draught to help you get the nutrients you’re missing from the meals that are essential for your recovery.”

“Thank you, Wen Ning.” Wei WuXian smiled at him fondly, with a little wonder Lan SiZhui found strange but didn’t question, moving over to the table with careful movements to sit and eat. “You shouldn’t save me the juicier pieces anyways, I told you already. There are people here who need it more than me.”

“Nonsense, Young Master Wei.” Wen Ning shook his head. “You’re injured, that’s more important than us.”

“Ah, SiZhui, SiZhui, see that? They’re pampering me like a prince, SiZhui, can you believe it?”

“Naturally, since you’re our guest, Young Master Wei!” Wen Ning protested weakly.

“Guest?!” Wei WuXian looked over at him with wide eyes, a piece of vegetable hanging from the corner of his mouth. Before he finished speaking, he licked it off. “Wen Ning, how could I be your guest when we’ve spent the past few months together?”

“Ah, I don’t think it’s been months, Young Master Wei.” Wen Ning frowned, though his tone was practiced, as if he had to correct Wei WuXian for more times than one. This worried Lan SiZhui. He didn’t know injuries like this could actually affect one’s memories, but Wen Ning and earlier that week, Lan WangJi also didn’t seem terribly worried about this, so it must’ve been something more usual than Lan SiZhui thought.

“It hasn’t?” Wei WuXian looked at him with wide eyes. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Three weeks at most, I’d say? Including the time you weren’t awake.” He turned to Wen Ning for confirmation, who nodded. It may be even less. Although Lan SiZhui also had to admit, it did feel like more time had passed.

“Oh.” Wei WuXian looked in front of himself and Lan SiZhui had a feeling he was not seeing the table in front of himself.

“Brother Wei, is everything alright?” Lan SiZhui asked, worried. He exchanged a glance with Wen Ning, who smiled at him reassuringly.

“Young Master Wei sustained a serious injury and his heart also stopped while sister was operating on him. She said it is natural for Young Master Wei to have a confused mind. It will pass with time.” So Lan SiZhui was right, this really was a side effect he didn’t know about.

“Are you sure?” Lan SiZhui asked, feeling awful about this.

“When have I ever made the wrong diagnosis?!” Wen Qing asked as she entered the room as well, several pieces of plants in her hand. “Lan SiZhui, don’t question me.”

“It wasn’t my intention.” Lan SiZhui frowned at her. “I just wanted reassurance.”

“Well, here’s your reassurance; I’ve been learning healing since I was a small child, and I am one of the most successful doctors of the late Wen Sect.” She glared at him. “Besides, why are you here and not helping the training?”

“It was not my idea.” Lan SiZhui said. “Besides, with my current state, what could I do?”

“Ah? Your current state?” Wei WuXian asked from the table. Neither cousins answered.

“Then why don’t you go and help Wen Han upgrading the houses?”

“He won’t let me because someone led him believe I was injured. Besides, we won’t be staying so long.” Lan SiZhui protested. Wen Qing frowned at him and suddenly, she took hold of his wrist. When Lan SiZhui tried to shake her off, her hold on him hardened. “What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked. Wen Qing just looked at him sharply, then let him go.

“If you don’t want to help Jin Ling and you don’t want to help Wen Han, then go back and meditate.” Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to make of this request, but after a moment, he nodded.

“Fine. Brother Wei, I’ll visit you in a few days.” He smiled at the other, who was looking at him strangely before agreeing. With this, Lan SiZhui left.

He did return to his cabin, but he didn’t know if he really should meditate. It was true that that was what he was supposed to be doing for a year after Wen ZhuLiu’s attack on him, but at the same time, it seemed pointless. However, he didn’t have a choice, once there was a knock on the door. He went over and opened it, surprised to find Lan WangJi on the other side.

“Hanguang-Jun.” He bowed briefly. “Aren’t you helping out with the training?”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded, then entered the house. Lan SiZhui let him, closing the door after him.

“I’d offer tea, but...” He gestured helplessly around. Lan WangJi nodded, then went over and settled at the small table in the middle of the room. “Um, Hanguang-Jun, I don’t mean any disrespect, but may I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Mn. Lady Wen requested I play *Cleansing* for you.” He said simply, plucking a few strings on his guqin he placed on the table.

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui blinked, then pressed his lips together. It wasn’t like he could resist. Wen Qing was crafty and knew he wouldn’t meditate. Even if she said she wouldn’t mention his condition anymore, she was still trying to look after him. He appreciated that, but at the same time, he was also annoyed with her. Anyhow, Lan WangJi was here and Lan SiZhui had no way of denying him. Perhaps this was why Wen Qing sent him, because she knew this, but it was more likely that he was just the only person who could do this at the moment.

Lan SiZhui had always looked at Hanguang-Jun as his adoptive father, even if in this past time he was younger than Lan SiZhui, it was impossible to shake this feeling he had been integrated into his whole life. It was the same with Jin Ling and Jiang Cheng as well as Lan JingYi and Lan XiChen – though they could relax slightly better around the two because they were much more relaxed themselves, but this Hanguang-Jun was only a little different from the one in Lan SiZhui’s time – more so, he was even stricter and colder. So, all Lan SiZhui could do was to say: “Thank you, Hanguang-Jun.”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded, then looked up at him expectantly. Knowing he was supposed to meditate, Lan SiZhui sighed and then settled on the bed in lotus position – only then did Lan WangJi began to play.

For a short while, Lan SiZhui couldn’t relax. It was true he had sought out Wen Qing’s help several times in the past, but still felt somewhat hurt by the way she handled him. He was her senior by two years, more so, to Lan WangJi as well. Yet both handled him as if he was a child. This irritated him, but also stirred a new worry in him. What could they be seeing in him that they handled him as such? Was he truly that pathetic? These thoughts tortured him until well into Lan WangJi’s play. It was only a couple of hours later that he could let go of this issue and think clearly again, and still then it was stirring in the back of his mind, along with other issues that had been haunting him since they’ve arrived at the village.

One of those was the case of Jin Ling. His friend, while smart and sure-handed, took a serious liberty by bringing the Wen away. Lan SiZhui knew he was not the fiercest person out there, but it still hurt that his own friend thought so little of him as to take matters into his own hands and take the Wen away. To assume Lan SiZhui would not be able to protect them. And again, the same thing with the training – as if Jin Ling waited for him to fail. As if he cared so much about the Wen in the first place! He wanted them all dead, didn’t he? So why was he helping them now?

Lan SiZhui always knew that Jin Ling had little faith in him. Ever since they’ve arrived to the past, he had to prove himself again and again. Lan SiZhui thought back to that night in the inn in YiLing, when they first arrived and went to look for the Yin Iron shard in the Burial Mounds. Jin Ling back then said he thought Lan SiZhui was a good cultivator – better than himself even. Although they were both tired and Jin Ling was also hurt by the fierce corpses that day, so maybe it had only been exhaustion talking. Lan SiZhui didn’t want to believe

that, but at the same time, he also had a hard time to believe Jin Ling thought that about him back then. Or, perhaps, he had – his opinion might've only changed after that. After all, Lan SiZhui did become a demonic cultivator and much like his uncle, Jin Ling also wasn't fond of such cultivation methods. The only reason he had somewhat made peace with Wei WuXian's presence had been because Jin Ling had precious few family remaining and Wei WuXian's presence had been a welcome relief that Jin Ling had not been as alone in the world as he thought.

Perhaps this was all a little harsh with Jin Ling. Still, Lan SiZhui couldn't help but feel this way. Since he'd taken the Wen from Qionggi, his thoughts had been louder than ever. Usually, with meditation and by talking things out, he could help this, and he was never one for long grudges, but in the past few months he had a harder time letting these things go. Perhaps it was that he had all this time on his hand, unable to do nothing. He lost his spiritual powers and he had a responsibility towards the Wen, even if Wen Qing denied that.

It was funny almost, how he felt this way, even though just a year and half ago, when they arrived to the past, he was the only one of the three of them who felt like he had no responsibility to help these people. Now they all worked on helping them. Lan SiZhui wondered about this. Did his friends also felt angry towards him for being selfish? After all, they begun this mission with the goal of ending the war before it even begun, then to lessen the victims as much as they could. They wanted to also stop Wei WuXian's descend into demonic cultivation and prevent Jin Ling's parents' death.

Although, Lan SiZhui supposed, they were able to do all that. The war was nearly prevented, but it was clear at the time there was no other solution to the problem Wen RuoHan posed. If they acted sooner and didn't stop to help out Cloud Recesses and Lotus Pier in their sieges, they could've plotted on their own against Wen RuoHan before war was even a thought and ended his reign.

However, they did not do that, so the war still happened – however, their goal to lessen collateral damage, was somewhat successful. After all, not only did they manage to save the Jiang Sect from demise, they also hurried along the war. In the past, the war lasted years, however, this time around they concluded it in months. This was the result of several factors. First, there was Lan SiZhui's demonic cultivation, which was effective against the puppets – although Wei WuXian surely did the same during the Sunshot Campaign in their time. Another factor was Jin Ling's contribution – and the Jin's in general. In the past, they have not joined the war so fiercely. Jin ZiXuan's rebel against his father had added numbers to their already larger than original army that turned tides. Jin Ling's strategies also came from a place where he had most likely studied this in detail in their time.

Another factor was Lan XiChen's step up. In the past, during the war he was still newly appointed Sect Leader, and because of that, he was still heavily relying and trusting his Sect elders to make decisions. This time around he did contribute from his own thoughts, and this also proved to be beneficial. His transition into being a Sect Leader on his own had been proven in battle, which was not only beneficial to his Sect, but to himself as a person as well. In the past, he was a person who trusted others very easily, and while now he also trusted, he also understood better the shady side of things, thanks to conspiring the boys from the future, to having his own secret to protect.



While he was not as battle-ready as Nie MingJue had been, his speaking up and private discussions with the Nie Sect Leader led to several good tactics. It also helped that they now had Jiang FengMian's experience to rely on. While the young Sect Leaders were more than capable on their own, there were certainly benefits to having a seasoned Sect Leader in their ranks as well.

So, truly, while in the past the war took years and several failed battles, this time around, they were ready for the war and got to Nightless City in months, preventing many people's suffering, including many of the Wen's as well, for seeing they were so fierce, many sought refuge at the major Sects' doors.

As for Jin Ling's parents, they were also successful in preventing Wei WuXian's complete transition into the YiLing Patriarch. He still played Chenqing, and he still created the Stygian Tiger Amulet from the sword found in Xuanwu's belly, he was not acting out as he had in the past. Mostly, he just observed and did not act as much on his own. This could easily result in the successful rescue of Jin Ling's parents, unless something went very wrong.

So, after all, wasn't it time for Lan SiZhui to be selfish?

He would save the Wen. No matter what the price.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

Not having anything to do, Lan SiZhui often found himself sitting on the little hill near the training grounds, just watching the Wen practice. They seemed enthusiastic enough, though one could tell they didn't think they would ever use this knowledge – as it was. It had been a few days since he last saw Wei WuXian. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan WangJi still went by every once a while to transfer spiritual energy, but even Lan WangJi was not there all the time, helping out with the training. Lan SiZhui wasn't sure whether he did this because he was bored, or if he truly cared about the Wen's fate. After all, he was mainly there to protect Wei WuXian, not to protect them. Lan SiZhui knew this and wasn't offended; he just wasn't sure what to expect from him once the Sects came.

“SiZhui!” Lan SiZhui unexpectedly heard from behind himself. As he looked back, he saw Lan WangJi standing on the bottom of the hill, looking after Wei WuXian, who was climbing up towards Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui was surprised; he didn't know Wei WuXian was already approved to move this much around. The last time he visited him, the other had left his bed already, so maybe Wen Qing didn't mind him wandering outside this time, though he knew right now his doctor was actually out in the surrounding woods with Wen Ning and Lan JingYi, who was looking after them, collecting herbs that would be helpful and grew in the winter as well. Wei WuXian was holding his stomach by the time he got there. “SiZhui, I came to say hi!” He grinned, panting a little, then lowered himself gingerly next to Lan SiZhui.

Lan SiZhui looked back at him concerned. “Are you even supposed to be outside?” Wei WuXian pouted.

“SiZhui, it was actually Wen Qing who told me to come out for a walk!” Maybe she did, maybe she didn't – Lan SiZhui couldn't be sure. Still...

“I’m sure she didn’t mean for you to climb up here though.” Lan SiZhui eyed him. He was somewhat annoyed that Wei WuXian decided to sit. He was glad to see his former adoptive father up and around, but he also didn’t care for company at the moment, hence the spot he choose, away from the village and away from the training grounds, but still close by so in case of any emergency, he was able to react quickly. He was already planning on visiting Wei WuXian later that day, but for the moment he wished to be alone a little bit. Of course, he couldn’t just send him away, since Wei WuXian was sweating from just this little climb.

“Ah, surely not.” Wei WuXian shrugged. “But here I am anyways.” He grinned.

“You are.” Lan SiZhui sighed, trying to decide what to do. “How are you?”

“Well, I’m here.” Wei WuXian shrugged. “Ah, SiZhui, did you know? Last time I was stabbed by a person, I was not so weak!”

“Well, you did receive a fierce spiritual hit.” Lan SiZhui concluded. “Naturally, this is why we wanted you to go to Cloud Recesses.”

“But in the Cloud Recesses, I cannot help you, can I?” Wei WuXian shrugged.

“You would be safe there though.”

“As long as the old stuffy Lan elders don’t realize I’m there!” Wei WuXian exclaimed. “SiZhui, would you really send me there?” He pouted.

“Brother Wei, I didn’t want you to be here in the first place, that’s why I wanted to send you away the day the Sects arrived to Burial Mounds.” Lan SiZhui huffed. “Naturally, I’d send you there.” There was a moment of pause, then Wei WuXian huffed, reaching over for Lan SiZhui’s hand. He pulled away, looking back at him with a frown, but before he could do anything, suddenly he felt pressure on one of his meridians and froze, unable to move.

“Ah, SiZhui, so rude!” Wei WuXian complained as he carefully took Lan SiZhui’s hand, pulling it away from his body. Lan SiZhui eyed him as much as he could while Wei WuXian took his wrist and closed his eyes, concentrating. “Hm.” He opened his eyes after a moment, dropping Lan SiZhui’s hand. Another poke at his meridians and Lan SiZhui could move again, though he remained almost frozen, not being able to make sense of this move, looking at Wei WuXian for an explanation. “SiZhui, have you been moody lately?” He asked, looking out over the training grounds. “Have you got thoughts you would normally silence bothering you well into the night? Do you feel like everyone’s eyes are on you and you’re constantly judged and hunted?”

“Brother Wei?” Lan SiZhui frowned at him. Wei WuXian looked back at him, smiling small and gentle.

“SiZhui, this is the effect the Yin Iron has on you. Without your spiritual powers, your body cannot fight the resentful energy.” Lan SiZhui looked at him for a long time without speaking. Was that right? His snappiness and temper lately were because of the Yin Iron? Because of the resentful energy?

“How do you know?” He asked quietly. “Since you have your spiritual powers, you do not experience this.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian was quiet for a long moment, then sighed. “Jin Ling spoke to Wen Qing and I overheard. I also asked Wen Qing why she sent you Lan Zhan to play the other night.”

“What were they talking about?” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“About Wen RuoHan, and the effect the Yin Iron had on him. Wen Qing’s words were similar, though, she said since Wen RuoHan had his spiritual powers, it was only because the high concentration of the resentful energy and the constant use of it, that he reacted in such ways.” He paused. “That’s one of the ways I can tell anyways.”

“And the other?” When Wei WuXian didn’t answer, Lan SiZhui frowned and reached for Wei WuXian’s hand, but he pulled away with a laugh. “Brother Wei, what about you? Do you also experience these effects thanks to the other half of the Amulet?”

“SiZhui, if it affected me, would I act like this?” Wei WuXian asked skeptically. Lan SiZhui didn’t believe him though. His description of the effects was more than what Wen Qing would’ve been able to tell Jin Ling or him. They sounded like the words of someone who experienced the same thing as well.

“Brother Wei, do you remember what we talked about in the Nightless City? In the courtyard, when we discovered that my half of the Stygian Tiger Amulet had merged with Hudie?” Wei WuXian was quiet for a long beat then he made a sour face.

“Ah, SiZhui, my memory lately... remind me?”

“We talked about this back then as well. I told you there was a reason why I wanted to keep you from using demonic cultivation. I told you it would bring you misery and pain. You said you understood the consequences, and I said you did not.” He paused. “I meant when I said I understood the consequences, so did you also mean what you said as well? Can we stop lying to each other already?” He asked quietly.

“SiZhui, if I said I understood the consequences, I meant it. But fine, if you want to stop lying to each other, then how about you tell me your secret?” He raised arrogant eyebrows.

“My secret?” Lan SiZhui frowned at him, not understanding what Wei WuXian meant by that.

“Yes. The one you’ve been hiding since we met.”

Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together. Wei WuXian rarely brought this topic up since they left the Cloud Recesses after the lectures, so most of the time he almost forgot this was still something Wei WuXian wanted to figure out. But of course, Lan SiZhui also knew his former adoptive father. He was better at solving mysteries than anyone else, and he was also curious by nature. He did not back down just because of a few warning words.

“I thought you wanted to find out on your own.” He let himself tease Wei WuXian for a moment, then he turned serious again. “Brother Wei, I told you already. It is not a lie. It is just best if you do not know about this. I’ve asked you not to pry.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian shrugged. “I probably told you then that I wouldn’t stop wondering, just because you didn’t want me to figure it out.”

“Right.” Lan SiZhui sighed. He remembered that Wei WuXian did, after the banquet in Nightless City, on the night when they drank, and Jin GuangYao hinted that he knew about them being from the future.

“Anyways, what if I already figured out?” Wei WuXian asked after a longer pause. Lan SiZhui looked over at him skeptically, questioning. “Lan SiZhui, you, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi... Are time travelers from the future!” He exclaimed proudly, grinning over at him. Lan SiZhui tried his hardest to keep a straight face, even though for a moment, his heart began to pound, and he panicked. He knew though, that Wei WuXian probably didn’t mean it... or didn’t think it through. If he was serious at all. It was hard to tell sometimes with him.

“Hm. And, brother Wei, if we were time travelers from the future, knowing my personality, do you think I would interfere with time as much as I have been in the focus of the events? If I was from the future...” He quieted a bit, giving the illusion that he was thinking, while in reality, he knew what he was going to say. The very thing he initially wanted to do when they arrived. Yes, he had come a long way since then, but still. “If I was from the future and knew a war was coming, I would not participate in it, in case I killed someone I was not supposed to. In fact, I would try to get back to my time as soon as possible.”

“What if you couldn’t get back though?” Wei WuXian asked, cocking arrogant eyebrows.

“Ah, brother Wei, I’m not sure if time travel exists at all. But if it did, don’t you think there would be a way to get back?”

“SiZhui, if time travel existed, wouldn’t the point of it would be to not get back? To change the past and live the future one envisioned when they changed the past?”

Lan SiZhui paused at that. Since right after discovering where they were, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling concentrated on changing the events, the three of them haven’t even really considered a way to get back. Back then, when they first figured it out, Lan SiZhui thought there might be a counter spell, or a way to create one using Qin language. But what if Wei WuXian was right and there had never been a way to go back? What did that mean for the three of them? What were they supposed to do after saving the Wen and destroying the Stygian Tiger Amulet and eliminating the threat Jin GuangYao and Su She posed against the cultivation world? Once they were finished with these, what did they plan on doing?

Before the war, when they took Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu to Cloud Recesses, someone proposed they go back. The counter argument had been that they were too famous and important to just go missing suddenly, and this was right. Lan SiZhui was ChunYu-Jun, and now the YiLing Patriarch, even if he did not get this moniker this time. Lan JingYi was Feng CiKe. Jin Ling was MouShi. They were heroes of the Sunshot Campaign and now the biggest enemies of the Four Sects.

After the war during the discussion conference when Nie MingJue learned about their origins, Lan XiChen also suggested that they just reveal where they were from and explain their actions that way. However, since so much had changed in the past, who would believe that the three of them don't trust certain people? After all, the past changed so much, who's to say they would also act similarly as they have?

"Maybe." He finally answered. "Still, wouldn't I do anything in my power to get back?"

"Mn." Wei WuXian hummed thoughtfully. "But at the same time, you weren't alone, were you? Lan JingYi was with you. He has a strong sense of duty, besides being awful." He grimaced with humor. "Then, Jin Ling was also with you. He has a really strong personality and he's really stubborn; the two of them managed to get you into trouble on multiple occasions in the past, didn't they?" He looked over at Lan SiZhui smugly. "So, knowing this, who would think you had a chance to go back? Jin Ling would... Well, I don't actually know what he would want to do this time. But if there was anything worth changing that would benefit him, he would probably do it. And Lan JingYi, he would also be on his side, wanting to fight, to help people. So, what chance would you have to stop them, really? And you'd stay, because you're also loyal; you wouldn't want to let them run wild." He nodded, as if he just confirmed a theory to himself. Lan SiZhui huffed.

"Brother Wei, if you believe in this this strongly; if time travel did really exist, how come nobody ever known about it?"

"Well, naturally, it would be risky to know about this." He paused. "Besides, who would believe a person who randomly said they were from the future?"

"And if they could prove it?"

"Ah, that's when it becomes risky. Say, SiZhui, if Wen RuoHan learned you're from the future, wouldn't he want to know how we defeat him and also go back in time to prevent it from happening?"

Lan SiZhui froze at this but forced himself to act naturally. After all, Wen RuoHan was dead, and this was only a theory from Wei WuXian. He would humor him as long as it didn't prove him wrong. Still, this thought got stuck in his head. At the time, Wen RuoHan did want to know how they defeated him in the past. Did he also want to know how to go back in time? But then, why didn't he ask that? Were they just too quick to defeat him; was this going to be his next step?

Unfortunately, he would never know this, though it wasn't like he wanted to know this. But still, if Wen RuoHan's plan had been to make Lan SiZhui bring him back to the past, then this whole thing with Wen Chao also made sense. The Wen Sect Leader's son probably didn't see the point in his father's plan to convert Lan SiZhui onto their side, so he butchered this conversion. But Wen RuoHan's plan probably made sense like this. Lan SiZhui was a Lan, so he would be able to endure great pains. Torturing the information out of him was pointless. But if he voluntarily joined the Wen, he would share his information as well. He was also the one who played *Spring Again*. Lan SiZhui wasn't sure if Wen RuoHan knew this, but if he did, that was probably one of the reasons he concentrated his efforts on Lan SiZhui.

There was nothing to be done however. The Wen Sect was gone and Wen RuoHan's plans were gone with it. Still, this revealed a dangerous possibility to knowing about the three's origins. If anyone knew they were from the future and wanted to also change the past, they would also be trying to get this information from them. It had been deemed dangerous to know about their coming from the future so far as well, but with this, they should probably never tell anyone about this. Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue also knew and who knew if Jin GuangYao also figured it out, if anyone else learned about this, the three of them would be in grave danger.

"You're right – however, you're also forgetting something. Wen RuoHan was our enemy, so naturally, if we were from the future, we would want to keep it a secret from him. But what about our allies? Why wouldn't we want to tell them of the future events to help them further their fight?"

"As I said, who would believe you?" Wei WuXian countered. "And besides, ZeWu-Jun knows your secret, does he not?"

"Right." Lan SiZhui sighed, regretting telling Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian this since he had after the banquet. At that time, he just wanted Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi to stop asking questions already and he also didn't want them to ask around others, in case someone who wasn't supposed to hear them did – such as Jin GuangYao. Now he also greatly regretted telling them about it. "And so?"

"And so, doesn't this also prove that you have, in fact, shared your knowledge with allies? It might not have been me, but with my personality back then, I also understand this decision. Though, why you wouldn't tell Lan Zhan, I don't understand."

Lan SiZhui sighed, not about to justify his reasons to Wei WuXian. He might, if Wei WuXian truly did know they were from the future, but this was not the case now. He was probably just coming up with wild theories, hoping Lan SiZhui would confirm one, and he was not about to.

"Brother Wei, why are we talking about this? We are not time travelers with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi."

This was, oddly, an easy lie to say. Either Lan SiZhui cared less about the rules, or it was Wei WuXian who brought this out of him – or perhaps even the Yin Iron, Lan SiZhui wasn't sure. He wasn't sure he even cared. He just wanted Wei WuXian not to ask or talk about this anymore.

"I'm not sure I believe you, SiZhui." Wei WuXian said, suddenly very serious. Lan SiZhui huffed but didn't say anything. "SiZhui, do you not trust me?" he asked quietly. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

"Brother Wei, I told you already. It is for your own good that I don't tell you what our secret is. It is not nearly as exciting as you think it is. We are just three disciples, trying our best."

Wei WuXian was really quiet for a long time. Then, after a while, he sighed.

“Fine. If you don’t want to tell me, I will not force you. But Lan SiZhui, let us help. Jin Ling asked Wen Qing about the effects the Yin Iron has on you because he is worried about you. I also asked her because I was worried about you. And seeing you just now and talking to you, I become more worried. When we first met...” Here he paused, hesitated, looking at Lan SiZhui from the corner of his eyes, then with uncertainty lingering in his tone, he continued:

“When we met, I got to know you as a gentle and polite person with a streak for being loyal to a fault and also very clever. Since I woke here, I’ve only seen a shadow of that boy... of that young man. You’ve been snappy and irritated, you’re also thin and there are dark shadows under your eyes.” He paused again. “SiZhui, I also know what it’s like to be in denial, to think that one is just going through a phase while in reality, this is their life now. If you do not listen to us, then listen to your own reason. You are smart. You know the Yin Iron and the resentful energy is hurting you. Do not fall into the same mistake as...” He halted suddenly, then cleared his throat. When he didn’t continue, Lan SiZhui voiced his own thoughts.

“Brother Wei, while I understand your caution, I also do not know what you want me to do. I am not Wen RuoHan, I don’t have the same ambitions as him. He was after power and he wanted to rule the world, so to imply I’m like him is insulting.” This, perhaps, came out a little harsher than he intended, but he didn’t stop. “I have lost my spiritual powers. How am I supposed to fight, to protect my family, if not with this method?”

“SiZhui, naturally, I understand this—”

“Do you, Wei WuXian?” Lan SiZhui asked, standing. “You just asked me to give up this method. What am I supposed to do instead? Drive my sword into my belly and leave?”

“SiZhui!” Wei WuXian also jumped on his feet, though he staggered, holding onto his stomach above his wound. Lan SiZhui didn’t offer his help. “This is clearly not what I meant. I didn’t even mean to imply you were like Wen RuoHan. See? This is what I mean. People are trying to tell you one thing, but because you’re so consumed by negative emotions, you do not see them as trying to help. I understand it more than you know. All I wanted to say is that you should accept your friends’ help and not fight them.”

“And how can my friends help?” Lan SiZhui frowned. “I understand you worry. I understand Jin Ling is worried. I even believe Wen Qing is worried about me. But in reality, there’s nothing any of you can do to help and prevent me from doing anything in my power to save the Wen.”

“No, there perhaps isn’t.” Wei WuXian nodded calmly. “But we can make this easier. You can talk to us about your issues. We will listen.”

“And get offended, as Jin Ling had last time we spoke.” Lan SiZhui said, irritated.

“Jin Ling is a spoiled brat, what doesn’t offend him?” Wei WuXian frowned. “I promise though, the rest of us aren’t so sensitive. But you also have to accept our help and not shut us out.”

“Brother Wei, I appreciate your advice.” Lan SiZhui said, not looking at him. “Please, go back and rest now.”

“SiZhui.” Wei WuXian frowned at him, but with this, Lan SiZhui left.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate Wei WuXian's efforts, really. He was clearly trying to help. It was just that Wei WuXian also didn't experience the same things Lan SiZhui was. It was easy to say all that, but in reality, it was not easy to do. Lan SiZhui didn't want to be this way either, but he couldn't help it – and also, he would not give up demonic cultivation just to placate the lot of them. The Sects would come at any time now and they would demand blood. This time there was no hidden entrance to sneak the Wen out.

The YiLing Patriarch in his time held bloodbath for blood also spilled, he took revenge and punished the Sects for their greed towards the Yin Iron. This time Lan SiZhui would hold bloodbath to protect his family. Perhaps, this made him selfish and evil. At least, then, all those people who judged him in the future for his surname and hated the Wen would be justified.



## Sorrow I.

It was a few days later that Wen Ning knocked on Lan SiZhui's door. He had been meditating, or trying to meditate, but the negative emotions and thoughts were too loud again to shut out, so instead, he mostly just sat there, arguing with his own thoughts. When the knock came it was a welcome distraction from these emotions. Lan SiZhui rose and went over to open the door, only to find Wen Ning there, anxiously looking around.

"Wen Ning." Lan SiZhui smiled at him. Wen Ning looked back at him with wide eyes.

"Ah, Lan SiZhui!" He said, sounding urgent. "Come quick. There are news from ZeWu-Jun."

"Ah?!" Lan SiZhui's eyes widened and he quickly stepped out of the house. "Did a letter arrive?"

"It did." Wen Ning nodded. "I've already informed brother Lan and brother Jin. Sister is also there." He said, then began leading him towards the healer's hut. Lan SiZhui followed him closely. Before they could reach the house, however, someone cried out their names. The two of them halted and looked towards where a couple of Wen had been talking in a group. When they saw the two of them, the Wen quickly hurried over.

"Ah, brothers, do you have time?"

"Um." Wen Ning looked around. "This is not the best time, but I can be spared..."

"Ah, no, brother, this is important." Another person said, so Lan SiZhui turned fully towards them. He actually recognized more than one person of the four. One of them was Tao Jun, who had been the courier of the Wen village; another was Zhang Ming, who used to be a merchant. The other two were two older men Lan SiZhui couldn't remember the names of.

"What is it, Zhang Ming?" Lan SiZhui asked the one who spoke.

"Ah, mister Lan, please, don't be mad..." Zhang Ming mumbled. "It was actually my idea to do this. I have a wife who is very hungry. The rations are getting smaller and smaller and we're seriously running out of food." This was, of course, proven by the other man's sunken cheeks, and also dark circles under his eyes. Most of them were that way lately.

Lan SiZhui also knew about their poor food situation, and he was already thinking of ways to resolve this. They were in a poor town and there was not much of value around, but what they did have lying around, they could perhaps sell over at another town. They could maybe also ask healers to make potions to sell. With the money coming from that, they could buy some food, enough to last them a little while at least. Unfortunately, when they left the Burial Mounds, they also left behind several things they should've been able to trade.

What they did manage to take with them and also what they found in the village was not much. Besides, as Wen Ning have pointed out the other day, people such as Wei WuXian who was injured, or A-Yuan, who was still in development needed the substance more than

anyone. Because of this, the rest of their diets were incredibly poor and never satisfying. Besides that, because of the low-quality food, the poor shelter and winter settling in, there were more and more people getting sick. Several Wen, including Wen Han, were bedridden with severe colds.

Lan SiZhui didn't remember much about that first winter he spent in the Burial Mounds with the YiLing Patriarch, but he knew there were a lot less people in there after that. They didn't have food, nor means to get food. The elderly especially took this harshly and because of that, many people died. Lan SiZhui knew that this was a possibility, but he hoped he was more prepared than the YiLing Patriarch had been back then. They had food and a horse to haul things around or sell if they ran out of money to buy food. They began building the houses early, knowing they were to stay – unlike when they stayed there with the YiLing Patriarch, back then it seemed to be a temporary shelter, and only after a while did people realize they were going to stay.

“We went down to the next village over.” Tao Jun said when Zhang Ming didn't continue. Lan SiZhui blinked at them, surprised.

“Ah, but... Who went with you?” He asked, confused. As far as he knew, none of his friends left in the past two days. Though he didn't see Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi walk around much. “Was it Hanguang-Jun?”

“No.” Zhang Ming shook his head, anxious. “Ah, mister Lan... We didn't tell any of the cultivators.”

Lan SiZhui looked at him for a long moment. “But then, who did you take for protection?”

“We didn't take anyone.”

“What?”

“We went on our own, mister Lan.” Tao Jun said. Lan SiZhui clenched his jaw and hands into fists.

“Tao Jun, Zhang Ming, this was very dangerous! What if they recognized you?”

“Sir, who would recognize us like this?” Tao Jun gestured at his poorly clothes. “If a cultivator was to come with, we would have definitely been recognized though.” Lan SiZhui couldn't argue with that, though he was still not pleased.

“Mister Lan, it's not like we wanted to displease you or cause harm.” Zhang Ming said. “We just didn't want to worry you, that's why we went on our own. If we didn't return, at least we didn't harm anyone else.”

“But we would've looked for you.” Lan SiZhui told them. “And what if you were captured and our location tortured out of you? The Sects will most likely find us on their own anyways, but there's no need for you to suffer because of it either.” At this, the two exchanged a quiet look and apologized. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath to calm down. “Anyhow, what's done is done. Did you succeed?”

“Yes.” Zhang Ming said, nodding wildly. “The food had already been put into storage and we were about to inform you about this as well. However, food isn’t the only thing we brought back, which is why when we saw you just now, we wanted to talk to you.”

“What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked, surprised. He wondered what it could be that they bought back. Another horse? More stuff?

“We brought news as well.” Tao Jun said.

“SiZhui!” Someone called out from not afar. As Lan SiZhui turned, he saw Lan JingYi looking towards him from near the healer’s hut. Lan SiZhui made a gesture, though what he wanted to convey with it, he didn’t know. Lan JingYi came closer though. “SiZhui, we’re all waiting for you.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “But this is important.” He turned back to the two Wen. “Tao Jun, what is the news you brought?”

“The news is this: according to rumors in the next town over, there’s a discussion conference held in a week’s time in the Nightless City.”

“Ah, A-Jun, I already said it, it’s not a discussion conference, but a gathering to march here. They say the Sects are gathering to eliminate the threat of the last remaining Wen and their protectors, ChunYu-Jun and his friends.” Zhang Ming said.

“However it is, they are coming.” Tao Jun told Lan SiZhui. “So, what happens now? Everyone wants to know.” He gestured around the two others who had been listening in. Lan SiZhui looked over them, then sighed.

“SiZhui.” Lan JingYi cut in, and all of them turned to him. “I’m sure Lan XiChen’s letter also informs us about this. Why don’t we go and see what it says first?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then turned to Tao Jun and the others. “You should come too. Once we decide what to do, you should tell the others as well.”

“Is that a good idea?” Lan JingYi frowned. Lan SiZhui returned it.

“This is about them, JingYi. Why shouldn’t they know, or have a say in how we decide about this?”

“Right.” Lan JingYi’s face smoothed out into a neutral expression. “You’re right. We should go then.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded again, then with that, they headed towards the healer’s hut. Although the invitation was to most of them, only Tao Jun remained, the others leaving.

“I should go, oversee the food situation.” Zhang Ming said.

“We’re going and alerting the others, in case they need to move, they should prepare.” The other two elderly men said. The others agreed to this and proceeded inside.

Once there, it was Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian, Wen Qing, Jin Ling and the newly arrived there. The house was not big, but they could all fit just so.

“Ah, SiZhui! I was starting to think you’d never arrive!” Wei WuXian waved at him. Lan SiZhui sent a tense smile towards him.

“Tao Jun, why did you also come?” Wen Qing asked. Strangely, to this, Wei WuXian perked up at that.

“Ah?! Tao Jun, are you also here?!”

“I’m here.” Tao Jun smiled at him awkwardly.

“Ah, good! It is good to see you!” Wei WuXian smiled at him warmly.

“Mister, do we know each other?” Tao Jun asked, confused.

“Ah, didn’t we meet?”

“I know you stayed with us for a few days before the Sects attacked.” Tao Jun frowned. “But I don’t think we were introduced. Apologies.”

“It’s fine.” Wei WuXian smiled at him.

“So, ZeWu-Jun wrote?” Lan SiZhui asked and after a beat, Lan WangJi nodded, looking at Wei WuXian who seemed mildly uncomfortable. “What does it say?”

“According to brother, the Sects will gather for a discussion conference in Qishan. They will be discussing the situation with the Wen and the Yin Iron. He suspects Jin GuangShan wants to lead a campaign against you.”

“He wants to join the Sects?” Lan SiZhui asked and Lan WangJi nodded.

“They haven’t even decided if they want to work together or not, how could they have decided to rally against Lan SiZhui?” Jin Ling asked with annoyance, speaking up for the first time.

“Anyways, it does give us a week to prepare.” Lan JingYi inserted.

“To prepare for what?” Tao Jun asked, confused.

“To fight, naturally.” Jin Ling answered. “We’re not going to sit here and wait for them to attack.”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “They don’t know where we are. We shouldn’t go there just to offer ourselves on a silver platter. Jin Ling is right. They’re gathering to discuss whether to rally against us or not. It couldn’t be an attack yet. Last time they came to fight and look how it ended. They would not try that again so thoughtlessly.”

“So, what are we going to do?” Tao Jun asked, anxious.

“Stay here.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Keep a low profile.”

“So, we just let them conspire against us?” Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to say to that.

“He’s right.” Lan JingYi said quietly. “Shouldn’t we come up with a plan and go before they get here?”

“We’ve been trying to come up with plans without any success.” Jin Ling argued. “What else could we think of we haven’t before?”

“How about this; since Lan Zhan and I are not yet completely disregarded, we should go as well. Let’s see what they have to say about this!” Wei WuXian said, but then the next moment three people snapped at him:

“No way!”

“No, brother Wei.”

“Wei WuXian, are you stupid?” Strangely, the last one came from Wen Qing. “For one, you’re recently injured. If that wasn’t enough, it was your own Sect head who stabbed you. What do you mean you haven’t been disregarded yet?!”

“Ah, Wen Qing, don’t worry. I’ve been stabbed by family members before, it’s not a big deal!”

“What?” Jin Ling whipped his head towards the man, glaring. “When was this?!”

“Ah...” Wei WuXian seemed embarrassed and like he didn’t know how to answer. He needn’t to anyways, because Jin Ling spoke up next without waiting for the answer:

“Wei WuXian, no way are you going to that conference. The last thing we need is you in Nightless City in this situation!” He glared.

“Why?” Wei WuXian frowned at him, and it was Jin Ling’s turn not to know what to say.

“Just is! Just accept it and shut up!”

Before the fight could get out of hand, Lan SiZhui tried to settle the tempers.

“So, nobody goes for now. Let us see what comes of this and decide later what to do.”

“With no way of knowing what goes down, and you’re not even there to defend yourself, what can we do?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“Naturally, I want to know what goes down. What, you suppose we should go and spy on them?” Lan SiZhui asked back and Lan JingYi shrugged.

“It is a possibility.”

“There aren’t a lot of hiding places in the Nightless City.” Wen Qing inserted. “And surely for a conference like this, there will be guards set up.”

“For now, let us do nothing.” Lan SiZhui insisted.

“And then what? What are we going to wake up to, on the day of the conference? That you went and attended it anyways?” Jin Ling asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Don’t be so suspicious.” Lan SiZhui told him calmly. “I just said we shouldn’t go. If I wanted to go, I’d say.”

“Like you have when you took the Wen to the Burial Mounds?” At this, Wei WuXian looked over with a furrow between his brows but said nothing.

“Unlike that time, this time I don’t have any crucial people in mortal danger.” Lan SiZhui told Jin Ling. “Back then, not only Wen Ning, Wen Qing and the others were kept poorly and abused daily, but A-Yuan as well.”

“A-Yuan?!” Wei WuXian stood suddenly, though the quick movement clearly brought him pain and he reached for his stomach and frowned, taking hold of the edge of the table next to him.

“Wei Ying.” Lan WangJi chided him quietly. Wei WuXian waved off his worries, concentrating on Lan SiZhui.

“Ah, SiZhui, A-Yuan is also here?”

“Where else would he be?” Wen Qing frowned at him.

“Where is he now?” Wei WuXian asked.

“With his grandmother, of course.” Wen Qing glared at him. “Why is this so important all of a sudden?”

“Ah... Wen Qing, do you mean he is with your grandmother?” Lan SiZhui frowned. Wen Qing turned to him with a frown of her own.

“She is also my grandmother, yes. SiZhui, didn’t you know? Wen XiaoQiang was my father’s brother.”

“I didn’t know.” Lan SiZhui looked at her in wonder.

“I called him uncle for a reason.” She rolled her eyes. Lan SiZhui tried to remember if she ever addressed the other man this way, but had a hard time remembering this detail.

“Right.” Jin Ling said. “We’re not here to discuss your family ties now.”

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi hissed, hitting Jin Ling in the shoulder with the back of his hand.

“What?” Jin Ling looked back at him, then back at the rest of them. “We aren’t. So, SiZhui, do you promise you won’t go to Qishan on your own?”

“I won’t go there.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then turned to Tao Jun. “The Wen should stay for now. Once the discussion conference concludes, we will know more about their plans.”

“Alright.” Tao Jun nodded.

“Regardless of the Wen, we could still go.” Lan JingYi said, and at the sharp looks from the others, he frowned. “What? It makes sense. We should go to know what goes down.”

“And what happens if SiZhui loses it again?” Jin Ling asked, cocking his eyebrow.

“He wouldn’t!”

“I wouldn’t.” The two Lan said at the same time. Lan SiZhui continued. “It’s not a bad idea. We don’t have to reveal we’re there, but we could still observe and learn about their intentions this way.”

“Didn’t you just say you didn’t want to go? Besides, tell me, ChunYu-Jun, when were we ever able to idly sit by and listen to others discuss our fates?” Jin Ling clicked his tongue. “This plan will most definitely not work.”

There was a pause, where nobody said anything. In the end, Lan SiZhui sighed and said:

“Let us discuss it later in private.” He said in the end. “We still have a week. We don’t need to decide now.”

“Fine.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “We should meet tomorrow for dinner. By then, I’ll be able to think this through.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Ah, wait, you guys!” Wei WuXian suddenly spoke up and they all looked over at him. “Why only you would go?”

“Wei WuXian, I don’t know how many times I have to say this,” Jin Ling began, sounding annoyed, “but this is still none of your business at all! Leave us alone already.”

“Jin Ling, you’re—” Wei WuXian trailed off suddenly, then began again. “We’re friends, aren’t we? So, why won’t you let us help?”

“We’re not friends!” Jin Ling scoffed. “Who would want to be friends with the likes of you?! And since when does Lan WangJi want to help? I can assure you, Wei WuXian, your presence is nor needed nor wanted!”

“Ah, is that how you speak to your senior?!” Wei WuXian gaped at him. “No wonder so many people—” This, he didn’t finish, his eyes widening.

“What?!” Jin Ling asked. “So many people don’t like me? Whatever! I don’t need their friendship. As long as people respect me, I don’t care about their other feelings at all. They can hate me all they want, I don’t care.” Before Wei WuXian could answer, he turned to Lan SiZhui. “We will talk tomorrow.” With this, he left.

“Isn’t he grumpier than usual?” Wei WuXian asked, looking after Jin Ling. Lan JingYi shrugged.

“We’re all tense thanks to the current situation. It is understandable I think.” He cleared his throat. “It’s better if I go as well.”

And so, soon, everyone left the house, including Lan SiZhui as well.

He wasn’t exactly sure where he stood with this whole Conference. He was not pleased that the gentry Sects decided to make decisions without hearing him out, but at the same time, he already told them his side of things. He just wanted the Wen remnants to live and didn’t want the Yin Iron in possession of anyone who would use it wickedly. There was not much more to be said about this, be it on a discussion conference or during a fight.

Still, if Jin Ling wanted to talk, Lan SiZhui would hear him out. He owed him that much.

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The next night, as Jin Ling promised, he showed up at Lan SiZhui’s house. It was strange that Lan JingYi didn’t join, Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to make of it. However, when asked, Jin Ling just shrugged, indifferent. He was let inside and they sat, eating their meals before speaking. Then, when they finished, Jin Ling turned to Lan SiZhui.

“So, you want to go to Nightless City for the Conference, like I said.” Lan SiZhui sighed. Even though they didn’t even begin their talk, Jin Ling was already annoyed with him. He had probably been wondering about his argument long before he arrived, so by the time he arrived, he was already worked up. Lan SiZhui found this usual.

“It’s not that I want to go.” Lan SiZhui said. “I merely agreed with Lan JingYi that it was not a bad idea.”

“So, you don’t want to go after all.” Jin Ling said, and Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“I wouldn’t say that either.”

“Which one is it?” Jin Ling asked. “Make up your mind already.”

Lan SiZhui sighed. “It’s not that easy. On one hand I meant what I said; since every important person is here, I have no motivation to go. But at the same time I see the logic in going. It would be good to gather information that way. Don’t you agree, Jin Ling?”

“It’s not that I don’t agree.” Jin Ling frowned. “It’s about what is going to happen once we’re there. None of us are good at sitting around and doing nothing. We’re not the spying types.”



“I get that.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “But how else would we be able to get this kind of information?”

At this, Jin Ling seemed frustrated. Lan SiZhui understood. He was also torn the same way. He didn’t want to leave the Wen and just spy on people, unable to do anything about what was being said, but at the same time, this was a great opportunity to learn about what the Sects were planning against them. However, this also reminded Lan SiZhui of something.

“Jin Ling, do the Sects know you helped us?” He asked. Jin Ling made a face.

“It’s not that they know this in particular, but ever since we admitted you were the one to take the Wen away from Qiongqi Path, the Jin doesn’t trust me nor Lan JingYi. The three of us had been close since the beginning and people know that. I can assure you, when Jin GuangShan got home from the Burial Mounds and didn’t find me there anymore, he definitely figured out where have I gone.”

“Right.” Lan SiZhui nodded, then another thing occurred to him. “But Jin Ling, Wei WuXian told us, when he arrived to the Burial Mounds, that the three of you had been closely watched since Qiongqi Path. How did you get away from them to come here?”

“Naturally, it was all thanks to Jin ZiXuan. Remember, when JingYi told you how we came here, Jin ZiXuan told the Jin he was going on a night-hunt. When he also told them I would be going as well, the Jin were cautious and didn’t want me to go. But then, Jin ZiXuan said this was a good way to keep an eye on me and so they agreed and we went – there were actually twelve people going, it was ridiculous!” He shook his head. “Anyways, we went to the area where there had been reports of monsters in the area, and began our investigation. The Jin were ordered to have at least two guards with me at all times. We quickly found the monster and began to fight against it, however, it was much more sinister than we originally thought. While everyone was busy trying to not get eaten, Jin ZiXuan actually sneaked up and took me away. We had to be quick with our mission, so he could go back by the time the others concluded the hunt. We quickly jumped on his sword and got to Burial Mounds to bring the Wen out – as soon as they arrived to the village, Jin ZiXuan rushed back and left me behind, reassuring me he would explain my absence.

“It turned out, he didn’t actually chose a random hunt to execute. Beforehand, he paid a disciple group to come to the area and investigate the monster without anyone knowing. Once they found it, they were to apply talismans onto it that would agitate it, not subdue it, so once we encountered it, the monster would be so vicious, even my guards would need to fight it. Then, he also asked these juniors to spread the rumors that there was another monster as well. There wasn’t, but he needed others to think so, so when we went missing and the Jin couldn’t find us, Jin ZiXuan, once he returned, could tell them we were fighting the other creature. At first, he couldn’t decide if he should say the monster killed me or that we got separated and I disappeared. Naturally, if I’m later discovered, it would come out that Jin ZiXuan was lying about me being dead, so I told him to say we separated and I took the opportunity to leave.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui hummed.

“Why did you ask?” Jin Ling asked. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“I was just curious. After all, doesn’t it make sense, what Wei WuXian said. Well, if he and Lan WangJi weren’t with us in the Burial Mounds, it would. But it *would* be easier if someone attended, who was not suspected in helping us, yet who had been helping us.”

“Well, Lan XiChen is going.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“But he is also a Sect Leader, and he cannot be suspected to be helping.” Lan SiZhui said, then sighed. “No, if we do want to know what goes down there, we will need to go there ourselves.”

“Alright, fine.” Jin Ling huffed. “At least now you admit you would go.”

“I’m not sure though.” Lan SiZhui said, frustrated. “On the one hand, we do know what’s coming. Clearly, the Sects will not let this matter drop, no matter what. It is only the question of when do they plan on attacking. On the other hand, if we could avoid a fight, clearly, that would be better.”

“If you want to speak up during the Conference—” Jin Ling began and Lan SiZhui made a frustrated noise.

“It’s not that I want to! I’ve tried that in the Burial Mounds and it got us nowhere. I don’t think this confrontation can be avoided.”

“Then, what would your goal be, if you went?” Jin Ling asked, for once shrugging off the insult of being cut off.

“I don’t know.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “Be there. Have at least the possibility to speak up in my defense. Take the focus off the Wen.” Jin Ling was quiet for a long moment after that, then nodded.

“Then we go. Me, and you. Lan JingYi stays to care for the Wen, so does Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi. Also, none of the Wen come. But I also have a request, in case we go.” Lan SiZhui raised his eyebrows. “You leave Hudie behind. If you lose control again, I cannot let you kill them like Wei WuXian had in the past. This is my condition. You either leave Hudie or we do not go.” He said, then with that, stood. “Think about this carefully. You have a few more days.” And then he turned and walked out, leaving Lan SiZhui frozen in front of the table.



For Lan SiZhui, the rest of the week before the conference was spent with thinking about Jin Ling’s proposal.

On one hand, he was mad at his friend to give him such ultimatums. Jin Ling knew full well that without his spiritual powers, at the moment Lan SiZhui’s only means to fight was demonic cultivation, which depended heavily on Hudie. For Jin Ling to ask him this, it was as if asking him to go to the Cold Pond Cave naked, having washed in cold water beforehand, in the middle of the harshest winter Gusu had seen.

On the other hand, the request was more than reasonable – it was somewhat a given as well. Even though Jin Ling didn't say, but most people knew he used Hudie to summon the resentful energy, and so, for him to have it while everyone was desperate for the Yin Iron shard, it was smarter not to wave it around like a price to be won from himself. Also, they've agreed to protect the past. If Lan SiZhui did lose it – although he hardly thought he would, after all, nobody was going to kill anyone during the conference – there was no saying what damage he could do.

Lan SiZhui wasn't sure if he should agree. Was this conference so important for him to leave not just his family, the Wen and the Lan and Wei WuXian behind, just to hear these people talk about something he was probably more than aware of? It was probably not worth it.

Lan SiZhui was surprised when a day or two into the week, someone knocked on his door. As he opened it, he saw Wen Ning standing there, a little pouch in his hand.

"Ah, Lan SiZhui, good morning!" Wen Ning smiled at him. Lan SiZhui returned it.

"Good morning. Is everything alright?"

"Yes!" Wen Ning agreed, quick to reassure. "I just wanted to come by and talk. May I come in?" He asked shyly. Naturally, Lan SiZhui stepped aside and let him in. They settled by the table, and even though Wen Ning had been playing with it all this time, he raised the pouch as if he just now noticed it. "Ah! Lan SiZhui, I brought something for you." He presented the pouch to Lan SiZhui, who took it, examining it closely. It was well-made, with detailed embroidery on it. It was so small it fit Lan SiZhui's palm perfectly, and it was also very light. As he pulled it open, Lan SiZhui found dry, crushed leaves inside. He raised it to his nose and took a sniff, but there was only a very faint fragrance coming from it, nothing like what it would be like if it was a perfume pouch.

"What's this?" Lan SiZhui asked.

"It's tea!" Wen Ning answered excitedly. "Granny found it in the house she's staying at and brought it over to see if Wen Qing could use it. She couldn't, so she just passed it to me – I meant to bring it over sometime, but I always forgot! Now, I didn't forget." He smiled. Lan SiZhui smiled as well, then put it aside.

"Thank you. I'll try it, once I find a teacup." He frowned, and Wen Ning actually laughed.

"I'm sure we can find one somewhere!"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui smiled at him, glad that he was in a good mood. "Ah, Wen Ning, you wanted to talk, right? What did you want to talk about?"

"Ah, yes..." Wen Ning said, fidgeting, suddenly nervous.

"Is... everything alright?" Lan SiZhui asked, getting worried.

"Yes! Yes..." Wen Ning nodded. "It's just that... Have you talked to brother Jin about the discussion conference?"

“I have.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“And... A-are you going?” Wen Ning peered over at him, his head bowed. “To the conference?”

Lan SiZhui frowned and sighed. “I don’t know yet.” He stood and went over to look out the small window. “If I go, I’m to leave my guqin here. If I don’t go, nothing will be different.” He mused. “The Sects are still going to attack. They’re still going to demand the blood of every Wen and they’re still going to use the Yin Iron to do sinister things. I’ve seen this happen in the past.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning hummed. “But Lan SiZhui, if you don’t go, ZeWu-Jun will also have to risk getting caught in order to inform you, right?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed. “Though, I’m sure he knows this and knows not to be too suspicious. I’m not too worried about that.” He said.

“And...” Wen Ning begun, sounding nervous again. “Why don’t you send someone else instead?”

“Like Lan JingYi?” Lan SiZhui frowned, turning back to Wen Ning, who shrugged. “I cannot ask him to do this. I actually don’t want to ask anyone else to do this. It is incredibly dangerous. You heard Wen Qing. There are not many hiding places there and if someone gets caught spying, they’re definitely going to be killed.”

“Lan SiZhui is really considerate.” Wen Ning smiled at him. “But what if the person knows the consequences and still offers to go? Isn’t it their decision to put their life in danger?”

Lan SiZhui huffed at that, humorlessly. “Sometimes people think they know the consequences to their actions, but in reality, they don’t really. It’s like this with Wei WuXian as well. He claims he understood the consequences of using demonic cultivation but look where he is now. He hasn’t even spoken a name of any of his family since we’ve left the Burial Mounds. Having fought his family and having caused so much grief to them, don’t you think this is hurting him? I wouldn’t blame him if he resented me for introducing this path to him.”

“Brother Wei doesn’t seem to mind being here all that much though.” Wen Ning frowned.

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “However, I know brother Wei very well. He is very good at hiding his true feelings. He would always force a smile on his face, but in reality, he would be living his own personal hell.”

“He is lying?” Wen Ning asked, surprised. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“It’s not even that he’s lying to us.” He paused. “Ah, it’s hard to explain.”

“Mn.” Wen Ning nodded, his face thoughtful. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“Why don’t we go and look for some cups for this?” He asked instead, picking up the pouch from the table. “A cup of tea always helps me think clearer.”

“Ah, alright!” Wen Ning nodded, sounding relieved to have something to do. Lan SiZhui smiled at him, and together, they left the house to ask around if anyone’s seen a few cups lying around.



In the end, with Jin Ling’s ultimatum, it was no hardship to decide what to do, and by the time the discussion conference’s day rolled around, Lan SiZhui had decided not to go. He told this to his friends the day before. Jin Ling acknowledged it with a simple nod, while Lan JingYi told him it was probably for the best, although he did seem a little disappointed.

The day of the Conference didn’t start like any other. The atmosphere in the Wen village was grim and people didn’t talk much. After all, it was most likely that their death sentence was ruled out just a few hours away in the QishanWen Sect’s formal home.

There were not many people who wanted to train today. Nobody seemed to stay alone either though, so they mostly flocked into groups and sat around or inside their houses, having quiet conversations. There was nothing to be done about the Conference and they all knew it. Just like back then, in the Burial Mounds, they had no choice but to sit there and wait for the arrival of the Four Sects. Although the Sects didn’t know where they were this time around, there was no doubt they would find them sooner rather than later.

Lan SiZhui also didn’t know what to do with himself. He ought to look for Lan JingYi and Jin Ling, but they weren’t looking for him, and he didn’t really know what to do with them anyways. They could have some of the tea Wen Ning brought him, or they could just hang out, though Lan SiZhui felt way too tense for that.

He also didn’t want to visit Wei WuXian. For one, Lan WangJi was also probably with him, and there was still an awkward atmosphere around the two of them. Since Lan SiZhui had parted from the Lan Sect, Lan WangJi rarely acknowledged his presence, let alone show any of the little affection they have managed to work into their relationship since Lan SiZhui arrived into the past.

In a small part, this also made Lan SiZhui wonder; if this Lan WangJi didn’t trust nor liked him, how could he be so sure that Hanguang-Jun in the future didn’t feel the same way? He also knew this was not a very rational thought – after all, Hanguang-Jun in the future was a little different than this Lan WangJi. He wasn’t so cold and strict with his views. He also knew Lan SiZhui since he was a small child, and surely, some of the dislike came from the fact that Lan WangJi was suspicious of him since the moment Lan SiZhui arrived. Still, it was hard to block out these thoughts.

Another reason why he didn’t want to visit his future adoptive fathers, was because he knew if he saw Wei WuXian, still weak from his wound, the anger that had been simmering in his belly this whole time would catch aflame again. He would also be reminded that in their time, the YiLing Patriarch could not save the Wen remnants, and so the Wen’s history became the victim of the storytelling of the victorious.

Lan SiZhui was just greeting some Wen and exchanging a few words, when he heard confident footsteps heading his way. Looking up and straightening, he saw Wen Qing stride

towards him, her face set in a strict frown. She was also hurrying, which made Lan SiZhui worried. Did something happen?

“Lan SiZhui.” Wen Qing called to him when she got close enough, though she did not slow her pace.

“Wen Qing.” Lan SiZhui turned towards her fully.

“We need to talk.” She said, having reached Lan SiZhui. She murmured a quick apology to the Wen he had been talking to, then took hold of his arm and began to tug him away. Lan SiZhui followed her, unsure where they were going, but willing to go anyways. Seemingly at a random spot, Wen Qing suddenly stopped and then pulled Lan SiZhui in between two buildings, going a little into the small alleyway before stopping and turning to him.

“Lan SiZhui, have you seen Wen Ning today?”

“No.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, honest and surprised at the question. “I haven’t seen him in the past few days, actually. Why?” For a long minute, Wen Qing was silent, looking into a direction, not at Lan SiZhui. Then, she huffed, as if she was annoyed she had to share this with Lan SiZhui.

“I cannot find him anywhere.” She said abruptly. Lan SiZhui gasped.

“But... Where could he have gone?”

“Listen, Lan SiZhui.” She sighed, definitely irritated. “Last night, he proposed to go look for some healing herbs I’ve mentioned we might need for A-Yuan.”

“A-Yuan?” Lan SiZhui frowned. “Is he alright?”

“He caught a little cold.” Wen Qing huffed. “It’s not a big deal. He had plenty. It’s fine, he is now almost strong enough. It’s just, if we had those herbs, he would be even better quicker. Wen Ning knew this and said he would go and get the herbs. This was a little time before sunset. I told him to take you with him and also to make sure he returns before sunset. He told me it would be fine. He would take you to look for herbs, and if you two were to return after nightfall, he might just sleep at your place.”

“He never looked for me.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “If I knew he had such plans, I’d have gone with him, for sure.”

“I know.” She said, tense. “This is why when I saw you around this morning, I got worried.” She paused, then said: “The last time he used this excuse, it was right after the attack on Lotus Pier during the war. Back then, he went to see how the Jiang Sect fared. Also, he went after you that time in YiLing, just to make sure you were off safely. He is prone to do stupid things to help those he considers friends.” She said with a judging glare.

“So, you think that is the case now as well?” Lan SiZhui asked with a frown. Wen Qing pressed her lips together.

“Regarding this discussion conference... Since we’ve learned about it, A-Ning had been quiet and thoughtful. I don’t know what had been going through his head, but I know him. If he knew you were not going and he also thought this would help you, I’m afraid...” She trailed off, actually looking and sounding young and worried. Lan SiZhui also felt grave.

“You think he might’ve gone to the discussion conference?” He asked. “But...” Before he said more, he remembered that a few days prior, Wen Ning actually visited him and asked him about this. About whether Lan SiZhui should send someone else in his stead. “I don’t understand. I told him we wouldn’t gain much knowledge if we went. Why would he still want to go?”

“If he thought it would help, he would go.” Wen Qing said. “But maybe I’m not even right. Maybe he went to pick herbs like he said, but didn’t bring you and he got caught or something.” She swallowed. “I don’t know where he is, Lan SiZhui.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui took a deep breath, realizing this was one of the rare few times he had to make the decision instead of Wen Qing. “I actually think it’s more likely he had gone to the conference, because we had a discussion about this a few days ago and he also seemed thoughtful back then. I also don’t think he would be foolish enough to not have asked someone with him if he actually went to look for healing herbs, especially if you told him to.”

“So, you’re going after him to the conference?” Wen Qing asked.

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“What about Jin Ling?” She asked. “He didn’t want you to go.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui sighed. “But it’s not like I have a choice. If they catch Wen Ning, I should be the one there. Jin Ling would go, but he would not care much about his life. Lan JingYi is better at fighting than talking. Brother Wei is still injured and Hanguang-Jun would not leave him.” He summed up briefly. However, he also knew that he could not leave without at least discussing it with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi. He promised Jin Ling he wouldn’t go, and he didn’t want to go against his own words. “Do you know where the others are?”

“Last time they were with Wei WuXian.” She frowned.

“Alright, let’s go.” He said, then headed towards the healer’s hut, Wen Qing quick to follow him. He didn’t want to drag this out much, there was a sense of urgency in Wen Qing that made him anxious as well. They quickly found Jin Ling and Lan JingYi with Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi. They were seemingly sitting around, bantering, although Jin Ling didn’t look like he was having fun.

When Lan SiZhui and Wen Qing entered, they quickly looked over, surprised to see them there.

“Ah, SiZhui! Come, join us, we were just chatting!” Wei WuXian invited him with a grin. “We’re sworn brothers, after all!” He laughed at that.

“I should’ve never mentioned it. Now that I reminded him, he’s insufferable again.” Jin Ling grumbled from his spot by the window.

“Jin Ling, JingYi, can we speak outside?” Lan SiZhui asked, ignoring the chatter. Jin Ling frowned at him and Lan JingYi seemed alarmed.

“Is everything alright?” Wei WuXian asked, looking between Wen Qing and him.

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui told him. “I just need to talk to them privately, if you excuse us.” He told him, then turned and walked outside, not wanting to waste time. Jin Ling and Lan JingYi spoke another word or two to Wei WuXian, then followed him out. Wen Qing also joined them.

“What’s going on?” Jin Ling asked, looking over at Wen Qing with a frown.

“Wen Ning has gone missing.” Lan SiZhui told them without ample. “We suspect he had gone to Nightless City.”

“What?!” Jin Ling snapped, looking over at Lan SiZhui with wide eyes. “Why would he do that?! That idiot!”

“Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui snapped at him, irritated. There was no time for outbursts like that. Jin Ling’s eyes widened in offense, but before he could say anything, Lan SiZhui continued. “I need to go after him.”

“No way!” Jin Ling argued, his offense forgotten. “I told you—”

“Jin Ling, he is in danger. I don’t care about the discussion conference right now, I just want to bring him back.”

“Well, you’re certainly not going alone!” Jin Ling told him strictly.

“Who’s going to protect the village then?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“While they’re on the conference, they wouldn’t come here anyways.” Lan JingYi inserted.

“How do we know they don’t have people looking at this moment? They don’t need to come personally.” Lan SiZhui argued.

“I’m still not letting you go alone.” Jin Ling huffed angrily from the side. “What about our deal? Go together, leave Hudie behind?”

“That was when we had days to get there.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I can go with him.” Lan JingYi offered from the side.

“You’re too soft on him.” Jin Ling accused. “No. We agreed, I’m going with him.”

“Hey!” Lan JingYi turned to him. “I’m not staying behind while the two of you go to face the Sects. You might not think much of me, but Lan SiZhui is my brother, I wouldn’t leave him



anyways. And I'm just as capable in a fight as you are. Besides, who was the one to bring him back from his episode in the Burial Mounds?"

"Who let him get to that point in the first place?!"

"We don't have time for this." Wen Qing inserted, annoyed.

"I agree." Lan SiZhui nodded. "I'm leaving now."

"Again, you're not going alone." Jin Ling huffed.

"I'll go with you. We'll be faster on my sword." Lan JingYi said.

"Then let's go." Lan SiZhui agreed as Lan JingYi unsheathed his sword.

"Hey! We didn't talk about this properly!" Jin Ling argued.

"Don't worry Young Mistress." Lan JingYi told him. "I've known Lan SiZhui since we were eight. I can handle him." He said dismissively and a little offended. Lan SiZhui didn't care for their discussion as he also hopped on Lan JingYi's sword.

"Bring him back, SiZhui." Wen Qing told him and Lan SiZhui nodded to her before the two of them hurried off towards Nightless City, leaving Jin Ling to fume. Lan SiZhui felt bad about this, but it wasn't like they had time to properly talk about this. Once this was over, they would talk, but until then, he just hoped Jin Ling would understand and stay behind as he requested.



"Do you think it was wise to leave Jin Ling there in this state?" Lan JingYi asked after a while. Lan SiZhui sighed, holding onto his shoulder.

"Probably not." He admitted. "But at the same time, what else could I do?" He asked, somewhat desperate for reassurance. He didn't like to do this, but he had no other choice, did he? "At this point, I'm not even sure what I'm doing is right at all." He said quietly. For all he felt in the past few weeks that he was angry at Jin Ling for criticizing him about this move, now he also felt unsure.

"Hm?" Lan JingYi asked back, probably not hearing him from the wind. That was fine, it wasn't like Lan SiZhui wanted to share these thoughts with him.

"Nothing." He answered, holding on tighter.

"He will get over it." Lan JingYi said. "You know how he is."

"I know." Lan SiZhui nodded and could only hope Lan JingYi was right. They didn't talk much after that.

The journey to Nightless City didn't take long, especially on Lan JingYi's sword. Even on foot it wouldn't have been more than a couple hours, if even that long. Lan SiZhui was

grateful for that. It meant that they got there soon. It also meant they were closer to Nightless City than he originally thought.

There was not much time to dwell on that, because as soon as they neared Qishan, Lan JingYi lowered his sword.

“I don’t know if we should fly over the city and enter that way.” He said. “The guards would be on the lookout. I think we might have to go in on foot.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed. It was a good thing he was in poorly clothes, though Lan JingYi still had his Lan Sect robes on and his forehead ribbon. They landed just outside the gates, where a couple of people were in a group, chatting with each other. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi watched them from afar for a bit, then turned to each other.

“How do you think we should get in?”

“You should probably just go.” Lan SiZhui said. “You’re in Lan Sect clothes and I don’t recognize these people. They might now know who you are and let you in.”

“And you?” Lan JingYi asked. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked towards the entrance again.

“I’ll try to get past them, pretend I live in the city and just gone out. We shouldn’t go together though.”

“Alright.” Lan JingYi nodded. “I’ll go ahead then.” Lan SiZhui nodded and watched as Lan JingYi adjusted his clothes, then straightened his spine.

He headed towards the entrance with the air of someone who knew where he was going. The group of people didn’t really pay him much mind, however, the guards also standing there stopped him. Lan SiZhui watched as he exchanged brief words with them, then they bowed to each other. Lan JingYi headed inside. Lan SiZhui waited for a little while until he was gone, then he picked up some twigs and sticks from the ground. Holding them and hunching a little, he also headed towards the gates. As he neared, the group of people quieted. He went past them, but when he wanted to enter the gates, the guards also stopped him.

“Stop there. Who are you?” One of them asked. Lan SiZhui kept his head bowed.

“Sir, I was just out, collecting some firewood earlier. I came back to go home.” The lie came to him without much issue. Lan SiZhui wondered when had he gotten so used to this.

“These little sticks?” The other guard snorted, knocking the pile of wood from Lan SiZhui’s hand. “They sell firewood in the city, why didn’t you buy some there?”

“I don’t have the money for it.” Lan SiZhui answered quietly.

“Huh? What was that? Speak up!” The guard told him. “You know, even though only people who had been excused by the Jin Sect live in Qishan nowadays, you’re still just a bunch of dirty Wen dogs. No better than your ancestors. Cheap like dirt, too, it seems!” He laughed out loud, and at that, the other people around the gates also laughed.

“Leave him be.” The other guard said with a sigh, as if even he couldn’t believe he spoke up. “Hey, boy, when did you go out? I didn’t see you earlier and I’ve been posted here for two days now.”

“I went out early this morning.” Lan SiZhui said, hoping this guard wasn’t on watch then. The guard clicked his tongue.

“A few people went out this morning. Come on, raise your head, let me see your face. If you’re one of them, fine, you can go back. Otherwise I need proof that you live here, only then can I let you in. There are important people in the city right now, we cannot let random people wander around.”

Lan SiZhui hesitated. Even if he didn’t recognize these people earlier and Lan JingYi seemed to get in without issue earlier, his face was very well known. Lan JingYi also fought in the Sunshot Campaign and became famous, but since Lan SiZhui fought so differently, a lot more people saw his face and would recognize it. Still, he chanced a quick glance up before lowering his head again.

“Huh? What was that? Do you think I saw you just now? Do it properly!”

“A-Wu, don’t be like that. You know these Wen dogs don’t know how to do anything.” With this, the other guard pushed hard on Lan SiZhui’s shoulder. Not having expected this, Lan SiZhui actually lost his balance and fell back. As he landed, he looked up at the guard in a moment of offense. However, in the next moment, the guards’ expression became surprised and alarmed and Lan SiZhui knew they recognized him.

“This is—!” Before he could finish, Lan SiZhui summoned Hudie without thinking, beginning to play a quick score. This came to him without him having to think much about it, but it was the same as it was that time with the Jin soldiers in the Wen village. Resentful energy rose from the ground at Lan SiZhui’s command, then entered the bodies of the people around him. Lan SiZhui didn’t consciously want to kill the men, but once the resentful energy entered them, they froze, their gazes going distant. Some of them couldn’t take it and began to bleed from seven orifices, collapsing where they stood. As soon as the first two people collapsed, Lan SiZhui stopped his play, although, he didn’t recall the resentful energy, so the guards stayed frozen, among with a dozen or so men who had been around the gates.

“SiZhui!” He heard from inside the city and looked up, seeing Lan JingYi standing there with a frown on his face, his sword unsheathed. Lan SiZhui opened his mouth, though he didn’t know what he was going to say. Apologize? Tell Lan JingYi he didn’t mean to do that? “Nothing to do about it now.” Lan JingYi said, though his lips were pressed into a thin line. “Let’s go.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, standing, feeling somewhat ashamed of his actions.

They hurried along the streets of Qishan, looking out for further guards. They ran into some, but they always noticed them in time and took a different path, avoiding further confrontation. Lan JingYi was especially watchful and Lan SiZhui knew it was because he didn’t want Lan SiZhui to fight again. Lan SiZhui considered that Jin Ling was justified in asking him not to take his guqin. There was no going back now though, they were already in

the city. The important thing now was to find Wen Ning and take him back. They would worry about the Sects later, if they were lucky. This brought a thought to Lan SiZhui's head.

"What if he didn't make it to Nightless City yet?"

"You want to search the city?" Lan JingYi asked, though he sounded strange. As if he was skeptical but hopeful at the same time. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"We should look there first."

"Right." Lan JingYi sighed, his expression unreadable.

"Are you mad at me?" Lan SiZhui asked, because it felt like his friend was. Lan SiZhui wanted to know if this was the case, but at the same time, they didn't really have the time to discuss it if it was the case.

"Let's just find Wen Ning, alright?" Lan JingYi said, not answering the question. This in itself also answered the question.

"Thank you." Lan SiZhui told him quietly.

"For what?" Lan JingYi sounded confused.

"For coming with me. For..." He trailed off, not knowing how to finish. He wanted Lan JingYi to know he appreciated him caring about Wen Ning enough to do this, and that he didn't voice his judgment of Lan SiZhui and his methods. That he was willing to stand by his side even though he clearly hated demonic cultivation as much as anyone in the future.

"Everything will be alright." Lan JingYi nodded to him. Lan SiZhui didn't know if he understood the unsaid things as well and answered that, or if he just thought Lan SiZhui thanked him because he was scared. Lan SiZhui returned his nod, making a note to properly talk to his friends once this was over. Ever since they parted at Qiongqi Path, nothing was right between them. They needed to solve this.

Not now though.

They reached the path that would take them to Nightless City, which was a little ways away from Qishan. This land was open and somewhat barren; it didn't leave them with too many hiding places. If they ran into a guard here, they would need to fight. Knowing this, Lan JingYi also slowed.

"Should we take the sword again?"

"No." Lan SiZhui shook his head. "They would definitely see us here."

"Then let's just go." Lan JingYi sighed. "If we run into guards, we will figure it out."

"JingYi—" Lan SiZhui began, but Lan JingYi waved him off dismissively.

“We will deal with it, SiZhui. Just don’t kill anyone, alright?” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, aware how bad the situation must’ve gotten that this was even a request. Was he truly that unhinged now? However, he couldn’t do anything about this now, so he just nodded and followed Lan JingYi.

## Sorrow II.

Thankfully, they didn't run into any guards on their way to Nightless City. Then, once they saw the Wen Sect's former place, they also saw that getting inside would be as easy as it got. There were only a handful of guards at the entrance. They didn't even guard the side, where Lan SiZhui knew from history lessons they could sneak into the Nightless City through a servant corridor.

He pointed this out to Lan JingYi, who agreed to go that way. They made their way there, evading the guards' gaze at the gates. As they hurried inside, they could already hear voices talking in the courtyard. Through the servant corridor, they would actually end up in the heart of the place, and they would need to make their way back to the courtyard. Since nobody expected threat coming from the inside, nobody watched the area as Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui sneaked through Nightless City. They crossed courtyards where just half a year ago they have been celebrating the end of the war – they bypassed the offices where the three of them and Sect Leader Lan and Nie held discussions, arriving to the side buildings of Scorching Sun Palace, where they planned on sneaking inside the palace, and where Nie MingJue probably did sneak in to assassinate Wen RuoHan.

They halted there, listening to the discussion. Unfortunately, this was not what they hoped for, for what they heard was a familiar voice shout out.

"The Lady Wen's younger brother, what is he doing here, spying on us?" They heard someone say first and Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged a wide-eyed look. So, they did end up capturing Wen Ning?!

"Wasn't the Lady Wen also in the YiLing Burial Mounds with ChunYu-Jun just recently? He must be spying for him!" Someone else said. Lan JingYi stepped closer and took hold of Lan SiZhui's arm.

"Don't do anything stupid." He asked in a quiet voice. Lan SiZhui shook his head and gently got out of Lan JingYi's hold.

"I'm just going a bit closer, so I hear better. Stay here." With this, Lan SiZhui quickly hurried off, using the familiar decorations to the side buildings to hide him as he headed towards the columns on the side of the courtyard, where he would have more advantage.

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi hissed after him, but he didn't follow, looking anxiously out onto the courtyard, not daring to move. Lan SiZhui settled behind one of the columns and looked out from behind it, just enough to see Wen Ning. As they arrived, snow began to fall, but Lan SiZhui didn't feel the cold.

The Sects were all there as well as the more important Clans. They were stood in neat rows, much like as if they were sitting in a discussion conference, except they were standing here. Each Sect and Clan had at least fifty disciple at their backs, as if this was a small army in itself as well. The Jin Sect's rows were the only ones not crowned by the Sect Leader in the front. Instead, Jin ZiXuan stood there, his jaw clenched, but not looking towards the rest of

his family. Jin GuangShan and Jin GuangYao were standing across the Sects, in front of the steps leading up to the Scorching Sun Palace. Between Jin GuangShan and the Sects, halfway, four guards were standing in orange robes Lan SiZhui didn't recognize, holding down a person kneeling on the ground.

Wen Ning didn't look like he was harmed. He had his cheap, tattered robes on, and his face was a little dirty. His hair was also not in its usual neat topknot, but instead it was in a relaxed style, more similar to how the Ghost General looked in the future. Though it was less lifeless and more neat. Other than that, there didn't seem to be a scratch on him.

"Hey, Wen dog! What's your name?" Someone asked from the crowd. Wen Ning's head was bowed, so his face was partially obscured by his hair; Lan SiZhui couldn't see his expression. Wen Ning mumbled something Lan SiZhui didn't hear, and from the shouts, others didn't either.

"What did he say?"

"Speak up, Wen dog!"

"Did he say his name already?!" Several people spoke at once. Once they quieted a little, the orange-robed guard behind Wen Ning nudged him a little with the end of his spear.

"W-Wen Ning, s-sir!" Wen Ning called out, though right after he bowed his head even more, pulling his shoulders up, as if wanting to hide from the world.

"Were you spying on us for ChunYu-Jun, Wen dog?" Someone from the crowd called over. Instead of answering, Wen Ning shook his head, but that was the wrong thing to do, because in the next moment, the guard lightly slapped his back with the wooden end of his spear. He ordered:

"Answer properly when addressed!"

Lan SiZhui was just about to step out from behind the column and voice his disapproval, when unexpectedly Lan XiChen stepped forward. This surprised seemingly everyone, because even the guards looked over briefly, surprised. Lan XiChen spoke up:

"Sect Leader Jin, there's no need for this. Wen Ning is just a child – he is only fifteen, not even allowed on a night hunt." He said with disapproval in his voice.

"What does it matter if he's allowed on a night hunt or not?" The one speaking up, surprisingly, was Su She, looking annoyed. "He is a Wen, doesn't he deserve the treatment he gets?"

"That's right!" Multiple people agreed with this. Before they could get carried away with this line of thinking, Lan XiChen spoke up again.

"We agreed in this very place that the Wen should not be judged as a group, but as individuals. Yet you still go against this and judge them as one."

“ZeWu-Jun, the Lan Sect is so forgiving and good-tempered, did they already forget what these people did during the Sunshot Campaign?” Su She asked and Lan XiChen actually turned around to look directly at him.

“MinShan, are the Su Clan’s principles not the same as the Lan Sect’s?” He asked coldly. “We are in a familial relation after all. Your brother understood this.”

“Sect Leader Lan, that was my brother, I am not him.” Su She glared. “Perhaps, it is time that the Su Clan becomes our own and part ways with the Lan Sect. After all, for all you claim we are familial, the Lan Sect always acted as if the Su Clan was your servants, belittling and demanding things.” For a long moment, Lan XiChen was quiet, then turned away.

“Despite my Sect’s view on humanity, it is still agreed by the Sects and major Clans, since the discussion conference after the Sunshot Campaign, that the Wen who had been found guilty of an offense should be taken to trial. I don’t see lawyers here, so we should not hold a trial here.”

“Sect Leader Lan, what you’re saying is true, however, do you think the same thing applies in this situation?” Jin GuangShan asked with a frown on his face. “After all, the Sunshot Campaign is a completely different event than what ChunYu-Jun had done recently.”

“That’s right!” Several people voiced their agreement.

“I say kill him right here! Send a message to ChunYu-Jun! He might’ve been a respected person in the past, but his recent actions are evil, and are corresponding with his uncle, Wen RuoHan’s actions as well! He isn’t even deserving of such title, he is just a Wen scum!”

“Yes!” Several people agreed. Someone then actually pulled out a sword and charged towards Wen Ning. Before anyone could do anything, however, suddenly Lan SiZhui found himself in front of the person holding the sword, with Wen Ning at his back, Hudie in front of him. Lan SiZhui didn’t remember moving, but he must’ve, must’ve moved and even played a score, because the person in front of him was frozen with wide eyes, a resentful aura surrounding him.

“It’s the Wen scum!” Someone cried out in the crowd, however, a moment later, someone else said:

“No, it’s Wei WuXian and that wretched flute of his! He played and A-Yin stopped moving!” Lan SiZhui was confused, for he didn’t hear the flute just now. However, a moment later someone cried out and pointed upwards behind Lan SiZhui. He turned to look, but right behind him, obscuring his view was Lan JingYi, Zhameng leveled at the guards at his back. Lan SiZhui felt touched by this silent gesture, that Lan JingYi actually came out from hiding to protect him.

Then, as he followed the people’s gazes upwards, he also saw two people on the roof, snow falling around them in fat flakes. Wei WuXian was just lowering his flute from his mouth, looking down at them with a strange, unreadable expression. Jin Ling next to him looked cold and distant, but at the same time, he had Huangfeng pointed towards the crowd. His



hand was sure, not shaking. He looked like a statue, and if they stayed like that, Lan SiZhui could actually imagine snow settling on them without melting.

“So, they all came!” Shaking off the mental images, Lan SiZhui focused back on the people around him.

“Wei WuXian!” A familiar voice called out, and Lan SiZhui looked back, seeing Jiang Cheng step forward. The boy didn’t step in front of his father, though it was a near thing as he glared up towards Wei WuXian. “Come down here, you idiot, and apologize!”

“Apologize?!” Another familiar voice called out as Madam Yu glared at her son from next to Jiang FengMian. “A-Cheng, you’re just as delusional as your father. Wei WuXian would never apologize for something he did, it is not in his personality.”

“You’re wrong!” Wei WuXian called back and they all looked towards him. Wei WuXian was pale and his expression was frightened; he had wide eyes and he took deep breaths. Either his wound was hurting him or he was not expecting to have spoken. “Madam Yu, I want to apologize!”

“Wei WuXian!” Jiang Cheng called, though he didn’t seem to know what to say. Wei WuXian ignored him as he looked at the two Jiang Sect heads.

“Madam Yu, in the past, I didn’t realize how much trouble I’ve caused you. At the time, I didn’t realize what my role was in the Jiang Sect, but now I understand. Madam Yu, that day you sent us away from Lotus Pier, you entrusted me with a task.” He paused, as if unsure of himself, then continued anyways. “You might not understand what I’m saying, but that’s fine. I need to say this now or I might never get the chance to do so. That day you entrusted me with taking care of not only your son, but also the future of your Sect, would anything happen to you. I realized back then that what I always thought was wrong. I always thought that I needed the Jiang Sect more than the Jiang Sect needed me. However, when you gave me this task, I realized you also needed me.” He paused again.

“Madam Yu, I apologize for making the wrong assumption. You need to know I did everything I could to ensure Jiang Cheng was happy and healthy. I do not care about my own life as long as he has his.” He presented a bow, then when he came out of it, he looked around. “However, this time around, things are slightly different.”

“A-Xian, what do you mean?” Jiang FengMian frowned. “I still feel there are things about this situation we don’t understand. Please, tell us.”

“Uncle Jiang, while I don’t know what information you’re lacking, I can tell you this; the Wen are innocent, just like Lan SiZhui is. In this fight, are the Sects in the right?”

“Questioning the Sects again, aren’t you too arrogant?!” Jin ZiXun spoke up from behind Jin ZiXuan. Lan SiZhui’s fingers on the strings of his guqin flexed.

“Ah?!” Wei WuXian looked over at him with a frown. “You’re still alive?!”

“How dare you!” Jin ZiXun pulled out his sword. “Come down here and fight properly – we will see who survives!”

“Try to make a move and you’re dead!” Jin Ling glared at him, his bow flexing.

“MouShi, you’re so ready to defend these outlaws, what would my cousin say?” Jin ZiXun taunted. “After all, we all know how close you’ve gotten during the Sunshot Campaign.”

“Jin ZiXun, I haven’t known you in the past,” Jin Ling began saying with a scoff, “but now I understand why I haven’t even heard of you much! You’re quite useless, aren’t you?”

“You—!” Jin ZiXun glared up at him.

Before he could continue, Jin GuangYao whispered something to Jin GuangShan, and the Jin Sect Leader spoke up, speaking over Jin ZiXun’s offense.

“Enough of this, this is not why we came here.” He said, looking around. “ChunYu-Jun, please explain yourself. We came here to have a discussion, yet you spend a spy and appear here yourself, what should we make of this?” He asked, his patience clearly running thin.

“I only came here to bring Wen Ning back to his family, Sect Leader Jin, this has nothing to do with the discussion conference.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Let him go.” Jin GuangShan tilted his head to the side and Jin GuangYao leaned over to whisper something to him. Jin GuangShan waved him off.

“Ah, but you see ChunYu-Jun, now we can properly bargain. I have something you want and you also have something I want. Why don’t we make a deal and settle this matter peacefully – as I intended in the first place?”

“Sect Leader Jin, that is also something I want.” Lan SiZhui told him. “However, since these are the circumstances, I actually reject this offer.”

“ChunYu-Jun, we always got along. Let’s talk about this.”

“How much more do you want to talk about it?!” It was actually Jin Ling who asked, though his bow was still not aimed at anyone particular, it was drawn and ready to shoot. “We will not hand over the Amulet to the Jin Sect.”

“Then, MouShi, ChunYu-Jun, I will have to kill this young man.” He said almost sadly.

“Just make a move, see who’s faster!” Jin Ling threatened, turning his bow towards the guards and the Jin Sect Leader. People actually cried out in fright and began murmuring:

“Turning against his own Sect Leader, MouShi is truly as insolent as they say!”

“If Wei WuXian tried that, the Violet Spider would not let him keep his head on his shoulders past the words he spoke!”

“What’s more, I’ve heard MouShi has familial ties with the Jin family, killing your own blood, isn’t it too much?”

“Brother Jin, what should we make of this?!” A Jin disciple spoke up, though for once it was not Jin ZiXun. “Since when have you joined to the likes of Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian – two demonic cultivators with ambitions not unlike those you’ve killed here only months prior? MouShi killed more Wen than most of us here together, yet you’re on their side now, threatening Sect Leader Jin?”

“Use your brain!” Jin Ling snapped. “If I killed those people only months ago, how could I now stand with people who are like them?! Am I an idiot?!”

“MouShi, with your manipulations again!” Madam Yu huffed. “You truly are the deadliest snake of all!”

“What do you know?!” Jin Ling glared at her. “You even fight with your own husband, how can you claim that I’m the snake?!”

“Hey!” Jiang Cheng snapped, glaring at him. “Watch your mouth, MouShi!”

“You—!” Jin Ling glared at him. “Don’t call me that!”

“Don’t insult my mother!”

“Does she need your protection?!” Jin Ling countered and at this, Jiang Cheng looked at his feet, flustered.

“ChunYu-Jun, let’s talk!” Someone from the crowd spoke up. It was Clan Leader Yao. “In the Burial Mounds after you took the Wen away from Qiongqi Path and faced the four Sects, you did not want to have a trial because you feared for the safety of these Wen. Sect Leader Jin was so generous, he offered to forget your misgivings and have a fair trial, yet you refused. Now, he offers you again to forgive you and have you hand over your shard of the Yin Iron in exchange of this young man’s life – the Wen you were so desperate to protect back then, you harmed several people with your wicked cultivation. I ask you now, what is holding you back? Be reasonable and take this deal!”

“I’ve already said this, Clan Leader Yao.” Lan SiZhui answered angrily. “I will not see this tool in the hands of the Jin Sect to corrupt the world.”

“Lan SiZhui, you’re making awful accusations against the Jin Sect.” Jin ZiXun spoke again. Lan SiZhui was getting really tired of him. “How dare you!”

“I dare because I know the likes of you.” Lan SiZhui said with a sharp look.

“ChunYu-Jun, I said already.” Jin GuangShan spoke up. “I looked at you as a friend and student, so I give you one last chance. Hand over the Yin Iron or I’ll kill Wen Ning.”

“Idiot! Do you want to die?!” Jin Ling shouted angrily. However, Jin GuangShan was not paying attention to him but to Lan SiZhui instead, who shook his head. Jin GuangShan sighed, then gestured to his guards. However, before they could move, an arrow embedded itself into one’s neck. The disciples who have raised their weapons when they arrived shouted in alarm and some even shot at Jin Ling! However, before the arrows could reach him, Wei

WuXian jerked, as if jolting out of a trance, and raised the flute to his lips, playing an unfamiliar tune. This resulted in the arrows hitting a barrier made of resentful energy instead of Jin Ling. Then the barrier dropped and along with it, the arrows as well.

After a moment however, Wei WuXian was not looking around anymore, but playing more, his face full of concentration and confusion. He didn't stop his play until resentful energy began to concentrate in front of him. His play was also strange – Lan SiZhui only heard him play two times in the past, and both times he was clumsy with Lan SiZhui's version of the Qin language – and also his own additions and inventions. Now he played very smoothly, as if this was a melody he played several times before. Lan SiZhui recognized some notes as Qin language, but he would need to concentrate hard to be able to tell what Wei WuXian was playing and he could not afford the distraction now.

Instead, he watched along with everyone else as the resentful energy concentrated into one spot, then after a few moments... the Stygian Tiger Amulet's other half appeared! This was the first time Lan SiZhui had seen the other half of the tool in this time. This was also the first time Wei WuXian had revealed he also possessed a shard.

“The Yin Iron!”

“Lan SiZhui handed it over?!”

“But how could it be?! There were only four shards, weren't there?”

In the meantime, Wei WuXian stopped playing and was now looking at the Stygian Tiger Amulet with a distasteful frown. His did not disappear as he ceased his play like Lan SiZhui's had, so his must not have merged with his flute.

“Wei WuXian, so now you have the shard!” Someone called out. “Hand it over, quick!”

Wei WuXian looked past the tool, at the person talking. Then he paused and looked all around the courtyard, his face twisting.

“The Yin Iron is a dangerous tool. It can cause much harm. It should not be handed around but destroyed as it is.” He said seriously, raising his voice.

“But the infected people, Young Master Wei!”

“Forget about them!” Wei WuXian called. “They were dead the moment the tool's energy touched them!”

“What nonsense are you sprouting?!” Someone asked.

“Brother Wei, should they not be treated?!” Came from the Jiang Sect.

“Yes!” Many agreed.

“I said what I said!” Wei WuXian argued.

“Young Master Wei, you have this shard now, don’t play God with my men’s life.” Jin GuangShan said. “Hand it over. If you do, I’ll make sure to console Madam Yu and get her to let you return to the Jiang Sect.”

“He hasn’t even left the Jiang Sect!” Jiang Cheng argued with a frown, but nobody paid him any mind. Lan SiZhui didn’t like the attention on Wei WuXian however, but short of revealing his own shard, he could do very little. As long as people didn’t realize Wei WuXian’s shard was his own, he might get out of the situation without an issue.

“Sect Leader Jin.” Wei WuXian began. “Even if I have to leave my Sect and live in exile, I would still not hand it over.”

“Would you just shut up already?!” Jiang Cheng glared. “Hand it over, come home and be done with this nonsense!”

“Ah, Jiang Cheng!” Wei WuXian smiled, wide and sad. “I’ve missed you!”

“Then come home, idiot!” Jiang Cheng glared.

“Young Master Wei, hand over the shard and you can go home.”

“Sect Leader Jin, that is not going to happen.” Wei WuXian smiled sadly.

“So be it then.” Jin GuangShan said, now angrily. “Kill him and kill them all!” He ordered, pointing at Wen Ning.

Lan SiZhui then began playing then, resentful energy rising from the ground. Even though the Lan must’ve performed some *Cleansing*, it was clear they have not put much effort into it and there was still much resentment remaining from the last battle of the Sunshot Campaign.

However, he was not quick enough, for one of the guards standing near Wen Ning actually moved. Lan SiZhui had a moment of panic, but then Lan JingYi moved quickly and cut down the guards, all the while fighting the others. Lan SiZhui relaxed and continued playing, hoping to raise some barrier between Wen Ning and anyone who would want to harm him. However, Jin ZiXun noticed it before Lan SiZhui could be done with the barrier. Their eyes met and there was a moment of realization in both their eyes. Lan SiZhui was too far away to physically stop him and his barrier was too slow to build. Lan JingYi was busy with the other guards, and he was too engaged in combat to notice, even if he did, he wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. Jin ZiXun was not far and he had his sword unsheathed.

“No!” Lan SiZhui cried out, though it was useless. “Wen Ning!” He moved, even though he knew he would be too slow and several people were between him and the pair as well, battling with the resentful energy Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian raised.

“A-Ning!” He heard another familiar voice and his heart skipped a beat. He could only watch numbly as Jin ZiXun turned and stabbed towards Wen Ning. Only, at the last moment, Wen Qing arrived, jumping in front of Wen Ning. The sword sank into her belly. It was only a second later that Jin Ling’s arrow shot into Jin ZiXun’s back. It was only a second after that

that Lan JingYi arrived and pushed Jin ZiXun away, cutting his throat. It felt like this all lasted for hours.

“Wen Qing!” Lan SiZhui screamed. Time began to move again and Lan SiZhui scrambled up from the ground, not even having noticed that he fell. He rushed over, where Wen Ning and Lan JingYi were already helping Wen Qing onto the ground. Wen Qing had cheap, grey robes on, which were now saturated with blood on her front. Lan SiZhui arrived on his knees next to them, hunching over her. “Wen Qing!” He called out helplessly.

“A-Ning!” She coughed, looking for her brother.

“I’m here, sister, I’m here!” Wen Ning said, taking hold of her searching hand, which was slick with blood as well. She pushed her hand up though, touching his face lightly.

“A-Ning... A-Ning, are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Wen Ning nodded, his eyes wide and frightened. “Tell me what to do! I don’t know what to do. I cannot treat a wound like this yet, sister...”

“A-Ning...” She sighed, then coughed violently, turning to her side and vomiting blood. Once she calmed down, she collapsed back into their arms. “A-Ning, it’s alright. It will be fine.”

“Sister, tell me what to do!” Wen Ning demanded, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“A-Ning, go back now, alright? Your place is not on the battlefield.”

“Yes, I’ll take you back!” Wen Ning nodded frantically. “Granny used to be a healer, she will help! I’ll call for master Hua, they’ll be able to help, surely!” He then tried to pick her up, but Wen Qing actually pushed him away.

“A-Ning, no. A-Ning.” She grabbed his robes and pulled on them. “Don’t take me, alright? Just go by yourself. Hurry back, alright?”

“But what about you?!” He asked, frantic.

“A-Ning. You have to go back. Don’t...” she coughed. “Don’t argue with me.”

“B-but...”

“A-Ning!” She raised her voice. “Go!” She pushed him away until he fell onto his backside next to her, watching her with wide eyes.

“I’m not leaving you here!”

“A-Yuan...” Wen Qing began, and for a moment, Lan SiZhui thought she was addressing him. But then she continued: “Take A-Yuan away. Hide him from them.”

“No!” Wen Ning crawled back to her. “You always take care of me, I’ll take care of you now!”

“A-Ning!” She snapped, blood trailing down her chin. “I am your big sister. It is my job to take care of you, not yours to take care of me. Be good and listen to me. Go now, quickly. Don’t let them see you. Take A-Yuan away and hide with the others.”

“Sister!” But Wen Qing clenched her teeth together and stared right ahead, not looking at him anymore. After a few beats, Wen Ning’s tears freshened and he shakily stood. “T-then I’ll, I’ll d-do as s-sister asks.” He stuttered, bowing shallowly.

“Good.” She sighed, her face relaxing. “Goodbye, A-Ning.”

Wen Ning didn’t answer, only bowed again, this time much deeper. Then, he turned away and ran. Lan SiZhui watched until he disappeared behind one of the columns, then turned back to Wen Qing, who was watching him.

“Is he gone now?” She asked quietly. Lan SiZhui nodded, unable to form words himself. She closed her eyes and groaned. “Good. I didn’t want him to see me die.”

“You’re not going to die.” Lan SiZhui said, though it didn’t feel like he was talking. He didn’t will his mouth to move, nor did he mean to say the words he knew were lies. Snow fell on her pretty face, the flakes slow to melt, though everywhere else around them they formed into water quickly. As Wen Qing opened her eyes again, she looked up and her eyelashes fluttered as the snow caught on them.

“SiZhui... SiZhui, I meant to tell you long ago. You don’t have all that much promise in medicine.” She huffed, almost as if she wanted to laugh, but instead a gurgling sound came from her throat.

“Wen Qing!”

“SiZhui... Tell me. Where you’re from, is he alive?” She asked, her voice weak and quiet. Lan SiZhui had to lean close to hear her. He looked back at her, his face must have been confused, because she found the strength to roll her eyes, even though in the meantime, she coughed weakly. After a moment, she began speaking again and Lan SiZhui leaned close to hear. “You really thought you were being subtle, didn’t you?” She coughed, though it was intended as a chuckle. She turned serious again. “Just tell me. Is he alive in the future?”

“He...” Lan SiZhui began, for a moment his brain stuck on the fact that she *knew*. Somehow she figured it out and never said anything. How long did she know? Why didn’t she confront him about it?

Anyhow, Wen Qing’s hold on his robes where she grabbed him tightened. He looked back at her and for another moment he didn’t know how to answer. Technically, Wen Ning wasn’t alive. He was sure Wen Qing didn’t care about the technicalities, though, so he nodded. She smiled.

“Good. That’s good. SiZhui, promise me that you will not let them take what’s left of our family. Protect them, alright?”

“Always.” Lan SiZhui nodded, his throat tight, his voice choked.

“Good.” She smiled, faint and barely there. “That’s good.” She sighed, then her eyes closed. A moment later her body relaxed, faint in Lan JingYi’s arms. There was a long moment when Lan SiZhui could only clutch her hand that fell from his robes. He watched as snowflakes settled on her eyelids, that did not flutter from it like they should be, in her hair, which had come out of her usually tight bun.

“SiZhui?” Lan JingYi asked gently, quietly.

“Wen Qing?” Lan SiZhui was still looking at her face. Usually so stoic and harsh, it was not lax and peaceful. She looked nothing like he was used to. He sounded strange to himself, young and sad.

“SiZhui.” Lan JingYi said carefully. “She’s gone.”

“No.” Lan SiZhui blinked, his eyesight getting blurry. Drops of hot tears joined the cold drips of melted snow on Wen Qing’s cold skin.

“SiZhui, please.” Lan JingYi reached over and took hold of his free hand.

“No.” Lan SiZhui repeated, still not able to look away.

However, the next moment Lan JingYi’s hand slipped from his, and with a painful grunt, Lan JingYi stumbled forward. Lan SiZhui looked up, seeing a dark clothed cultivator’s sword embedded into Lan JingYi’s shoulder. Lan JingYi gritted his teeth, blindly groping for his sword he’d placed on the ground when he took hold of Wen Qing.

Lan SiZhui’s heart soared. To lose Wei WuXian was one thing, losing Wen Qing didn’t hurt any less, but the thought of losing Lan JingYi, his brother, the person who had the kindest heart Lan SiZhui knew, who was so bright and ready to smile, who didn’t judge him even when he literally killed people just now... No, he would never lose Lan JingYi to these people. He refused.

He found Zhameng underneath Wen Qing’s limp body, and with familiar ease he slid the blade out of the sheath, his childhood friend’s blade not resisting him for a moment as he stood, stepping over Wen Qing’s body, leaning over Lan JingYi’s, and with a confident move, ending the cultivator’s life. The blood seeping into Lan JingYi’s pure white robes blinded him.

“SiZhui, wait—” Lan JingYi called for him, but Lan SiZhui was already moving, dropping Zhameng, pulling out Hudie.

There was protective rage against anyone who even thought of harming his family, of harming Lan JingYi. Then, there was nothing again, just like only weeks ago in the Burial Mounds, seeing Wei WuXian’s lifeless body, the overwhelming grief and blind, confusing, terrifying blank space.

Except right now he knew what he was doing, fueled by blinding rage, the sight of blood soaked grey robes, and the sight of blood soaked white robes. So much blood, so much of his family’s blood. The Sects took them away so long ago and they were going to take them



away now as well. The world didn't want to see Lan SiZhui whole ever since he was a toddler. He was at peace with that. But he refused A-Yuan to have to grow up with this hatred against him as well. He refused to let anyone else dear to him getting lost to this curse that followed him.

This was not like the Burial Mounds. Lan SiZhui was not unconscious of his actions. Instead, he knew what he was doing. This numbness, this confusion and misery and pain, he knew this well. He felt the same when he fell into the Burial Mounds. This was pure resentful energy. It was around him, inside him, consuming him. Back then he had reason to keep going and not give in. Now he felt he had none.

Screams echoed through his head, both of the ghosts and of the people around him. Pain gripped him from all sides. He was cold, the type that came from the inside, the type one could not dress up against. Lan SiZhui closed his eyes and let the resentful energy take over, finding relief in defeat. How easy was it. All he had to do against the awful feelings he had lately was to give in.

He was aware of the fighting around him, knew that while he was occupied with his own drama, everybody began to fight. Wei WuXian was also playing, though he was playing a gentler tune, just enough to summon resentful ghosts and occupy the Sects, but not enough to kill them. However, Lan SiZhui had no such issues, his fingers flying over Hudie's strings without him having to think much about it.

Snow fell in a thick blanket all around them, and Lan SiZhui watched as in front of him the Sects fought, their sounds muted as if the world had gone silent. As if they were back in Cloud Recesses during the winter. Only nobody ever fought in the Cloud Recesses like this, with such strong resentment and killing intent. It all felt like a dream as Lan SiZhui watched.

"Lan SiZhui, enough!" Suddenly, Jin Ling was in front of him, his bow aimed at him. "Stop this!"

"Why should I?" Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows feeling distant and detached, but also painfully present. "Were they willing to stop in return?"

"SiZhui, I will shoot you if necessary!" Jin Ling threatened, though he didn't seem happy about it.

"These people have killed my family once and plan on doing it again." Lan SiZhui told him. "When I explained to them, they didn't listen. Can't I take my revenge then?"

"Revenge?!" Jin Ling glared at him. "Lan SiZhui, you're a Lan. Lan don't take revenge, they forgive and empathize." He said, almost angrily. "You're over the line. What would Senior Wei and Hanguang-Jun say if they saw you now?!" At this, Lan SiZhui just kept playing, looking at Jin Ling. Feeling all his previous negative emotions come to the surface about his friend. "Lan SiZhui!" Jin Ling snapped and clearly wanted to say something else. He held himself back however, and instead, flexed his bow. "Stop this now or I'll really shoot you!"

"So, shoot me." Lan SiZhui told him gravely. "You never cared about the Wen anyways, so I didn't expect you to understand. At least I hoped..." He trailed off, then seeing Jin Ling's

frown, he continued. “I hoped that you would at least understand the need to protect my family. After all, isn’t that why you fight as well? To protect your family? Your parents?”

“That is entirely different!” Jin Ling snapped. “I wouldn’t kill in their names!”

“Wouldn’t you?” Lan SiZhui asked, getting truly angry now. “You killed thousands in the Sunshot Campaign, just to protect him. You almost killed Senior Wei when you stabbed him.”

“Lan SiZhui, do you remember that night in YiLing, before this all started and we went after the Yin Iron shards? Do you remember what you said then?” Jin Ling didn’t leave him time to answer. “You said you do not hold this against me. You said it was not right to change the past. Tell me, were all those lies?!”

“I didn’t lie to you.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“So, you’re just bringing these things up to prove that you’re always right?”

“I’m not trying to prove anything.” Lan SiZhui said, resigned. Always the submissive one to Jin Ling’s temper tantrums. This was a role he once thought was necessary in the name of good manners and faith. Jin Ling was a Sect heir, then later a Sect Leader, and Lan SiZhui always believed while he was often hurtful on purpose, he was often hurtful unconsciously as well. Maybe he had been wrong about that. “I’m just trying to protect my family.”

“Your family isn’t the Wen.” Jin Ling scoffed, and that brought forth that anger brewing in Lan SiZhui again. “Or don’t you remember who took you in? Who raised you?”

“Do not talk to me about who my family is.” Lan SiZhui said, feeling his muscles flex in response to the sudden fury overcoming him. Did Jin Ling not think he would do anything for the Lan as well? To protect Lan JingYi, to protect Hanguang-Jun? Was he not aware, then, that Jin Ling now also joined those Lan SiZhui considered family? Would they not do anything for each other? But maybe that was just him. Maybe he truly was too naïve, as Jin Ling was so fond of saying. “You don’t know anything.”

“And you claim you do about mine?” Jin Ling glared.

“When have I ever said that?” Lan SiZhui scoffed. “Why does everything have to be about you?” At this, Jin Ling’s eyes widened and his hold on his bow flexed, but he didn’t shoot. Lan SiZhui kept playing, the music fading into the background as him and Jin Ling stared down each other. They were both surrounded by thick resentful energy, but not the same bubble Lan SiZhui had been back in the Burial Mounds. This was thinner, bigger, blanketing the whole Nightless City, not just himself. Despair and resentment swirled around them like the snow that was falling.

“So, what are you going to do now?” Jin Ling asked. “Kill everyone here, become the YiLing Patriarch?! Should JingYi kill you then, so then history can repeat itself? The tyrant’s life ended by the hand of his own brother! Torn into pieces by its own creation, the resentful tool Stygian Tiger Amulet!” Jin Ling mocked the stories they’ve all heard by this point.

“I’m just taking justice.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Not more than what they deserve.”

“Is this what they deserve?! Lan SiZhui, the Lan Sect’s rules are not there to control how you feel, but how you behave. You once told me even though you were mad at my uncle, you didn’t act out in anger, because if you did, you would be no better than him. What would Hanguang-Jun think of you now, if he saw you? His perfect disciple, the most brilliant cultivator in our generation. How low you’ve sunk!”

“Are you going to call me a Wen dog as well?!” Lan SiZhui snapped, unable to hold back. His fingers twitched on the strings, playing a harsh note. Resentful energy jerked around them before he settled the score.

“Lan SiZhui, don’t push it too far.” Jin Ling glared, then in clear agitation, he let loose the arrow he had notched. However, Lan SiZhui was ready for the strike and blocked it effectively, as well as the next several arrows Jin Ling sent his way. By the end, Jin Ling realized this was useless, and holding his bow as if he would a sword, he swung at Lan SiZhui. Not expecting this move, Lan SiZhui had to move out of the way, but he effectively evaded these strikes as well, while Jin Ling became more and more frustrated, letting out angry cries.

“Lan SiZhui!” Jin Ling roared as he stopped briefly, breathing heavily. Then he notched another arrow and shot. This time, Lan SiZhui didn’t expect this move and the arrow almost hit him, scraping his shoulder instead. After this, they stopped, glaring at each other.

“When it’s convenient for you, I’m your friend, but the moment it’s uncomfortable, I’m a Wen dog. Is that it, Jin Ling?!” He provoked, not knowing where this came from. Didn’t care much either. “You’re saying I’m going too far, yet all I’m saying are just your own words. Remember? This is—”

“I remember!” Jin Ling snapped, irritated, swiping towards Lan SiZhui with his bow again, but he got out of range again. Jin Ling didn’t try again, though he stood ready to strike. “Is this the resentful energy affecting you, or have your famous Lan patience finally snapped and you’re letting out your past hurts?”

“Since I’m no longer in the Lan Sect, you can stop upholding me to their standards. I’m a Wen and not a Lan.”

“Bullshit!” Jin Ling growled, frustrated. “Lan WangJi had been raising you since you were a child. You hardly remember the Wen.”

“And whose fault is that you think?!” Lan SiZhui gestured around. “These people killed my family!” He glared at Jin Ling, begging him in his heart to understand. “Jin Ling, Hanguang-Jun had been a great mentor. Senior Wei had been a good uncle. But Jin Ling, I’ve met my *parents*.” He said helplessly. Jin Ling looked at him with a horrified look.

“What do you mean you’ve met your parents?” Right. Lan SiZhui had learned the truth about Wen XiaoQiang and Hao YiFei only in Qiongqi Path. Before he went back for the Wen, they didn’t have time or opportunity to talk with Wei WuXian there. Since then, they have only met at the new village, where they had other things to worry about and it never came up.

Before he could say more, however, Jin Ling's expression darkened. "It doesn't matter. They're dead now, aren't they?" He asked and Lan SiZhui recoiled, reminded that he was the one to allow that. He knew Jin Ling didn't know that and didn't mean it like that either, but he couldn't help but remember. "They were strangers then. They weren't the ones to raise you."

"Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan weren't the ones to raise you either, yet see how far you go to protect them!" Lan SiZhui answered helplessly. How could Jin Ling not see the hypocrisy in his own words? When Jin Ling scoffed, Lan SiZhui had his answer to this question. "So, it's only wrong when I do it?"

"You're not doing anything for them! Don't you see? You're killing innocents!"

"How are they innocent? Wasn't your uncle innocent as well, in this time, when he hadn't even committed his crimes? Yet you were so quick to judge him from the beginning!"

"You still don't understand, do you?!" Jin Ling snapped, shooting another arrow towards him that Lan SiZhui easily fended off. "You're better than me, don't you understand?! You've always been the better cultivator, the better mannered, the bigger person, for you to do this, it's like watching Hanguang-Jun stand by Wei WuXian's side in Koi Tower!"

"So what?!" Lan SiZhui asked back, angry. "You've never seen past this, have you?! I'm a polite Lan disciple to you, no more than a person with strong morals and good manners, but you never took me seriously. I'm an idea for you, not a person."

"What are you even talking about?!" Jin Ling threw up his arms. "Are we speaking the same language?!"

"You just said I'm better than you." Lan SiZhui told him. "But I'm not less human because of this. Just because I'm the head disciple of the Lan Sect, just because I have good manners and morals, does it also mean I'm not supposed to have feelings?!"

"You're the one not listening!" Jin Ling clicked his tongue. "You've said yourself, the Lan Sect rules—"

"Don't talk to me about the rules!" Lan SiZhui snapped, annoyed. "Weren't you also the one who said those of us who live by the rules don't see the world realistically?!"

At this, Jin Ling said nothing, just watched him with a frown. "You're not yourself. I can see that now." He said instead and this just angered Lan SiZhui even more.

"So, because I don't fit into your idea of me anymore, I'm not myself anymore?"

"It's because of the resentful energy. I shouldn't get mad at your provocation." Jin Ling said, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"So, it is because of the resentful energy?" Lan SiZhui frowned. "How convenient that you can blame it for everything that bothers you. Your uncle was hurt by the YiLing Patriarch, and even though you didn't even know him, you knew he must be the person with the correct

opinion, because Wei WuXian was also a demonic cultivator. Before you knew he was the YiLing Patriarch, you hated Mo XuanYu as well, since he was a demonic cultivator. Now that I'm your problem, it is also because I'm a demonic cultivator." Jin Ling's eyes widened at this. "You look down on this method so much because your uncle taught you to hate it, and since you had no one else to learn from, you just took his word for it. In reality, in our time as well the Sects had greatly benefited from demonic cultivation."

"You're not a demonic cultivator, SiZhui." Jin Ling told him with a dangerous edge to his voice.

"What?" Lan SiZhui asked, suddenly confused.

"You're not!" Jin Ling snapped. "This is a temporary thing. This was necessary for the Sunshot Campaign, then later, because you got injured fighting Wen ZhuLiu. But once you get your spiritual energy back, you will return to orthodox cultivation."

"It doesn't mean I'm not a demonic cultivator now." Lan SiZhui frowned. At this, Jin Ling got unreasonably angry.

"It does! Demonic cultivators all die, SiZhui, haven't you learned this by now?!" With this, Jin Ling attacked him so suddenly, Lan SiZhui barely had time to react.

Jin Ling had his sword in his hand, and to this, Lan SiZhui's instinct was to also draw his own sword. However, since he got his sword and guqin back on Phoenix Mountain, he barely even touched his sword, hiding it away in his qiankun pouch. This caused some internal confusion within himself, the instinct to draw Yingjiu, but Yingjiu not being at hand fast, which cost him his focus to avoid Jin Ling's blade. The sword didn't hurt him though, missing his head by a long shot. But as Lan SiZhui stepped back, something hit his back, and suddenly, Lan SiZhui was unable to move. Jin Ling in front of him visibly relaxed, his shoulders dropping and his chest heaving with a big sigh as he lost the tension in his body. His sword was lowered to his side, then he sheathed it as he moved his gaze over Lan SiZhui's shoulder.

"About time." He said irritated to someone behind Lan SiZhui.

"Do you know how hard it is to get through all that resentful energy? Besides, I'm injured!" Lan JingYi's voice came from behind him. "Next time, let's switch. I'll distract him while you apply the talisman."

"How about making sure there's no next time?!" Jin Ling glared.

"Fine by me!" Lan JingYi said cheerfully. He then came around and faced Lan SiZhui with a frown. "Sorry, SiZhui." He murmured, then reached out and gently took his guqin away, bagging it into an evil suppressing qiankun pouch. His shoulder was not bleeding anymore, but it still didn't look good, his arm dangling uselessly by his side. Jin Ling nodded, satisfied, then turned his back. Suddenly, the tension returned to Jin Ling's shoulders.

"Over there! The tyrant is defeated, take his head!" Someone called out, then the next moment, another person landed by Lan SiZhui. He couldn't move, so he only saw the scene

briefly from behind Jin Ling and Lan JingYi. The Sects stopped fighting the resentful energy, and were now turned towards him, ready for a fight. However, Jin Ling shuffled to shield him better, and Lan JingYi also stepped in front of Lan SiZhui.

“Take his head?!” Jin Ling called back. “For what, huh?! Weren’t you the ones who decided to kill an innocent? Was Lan SiZhui not in the right to take revenge on you all?!”

“Revenge?!” Someone else called out. “The Wen are evildoers who want our demise! It is a good deed to kill one!”

“You’re lucky Lan SiZhui is subdued!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Or else what? Or else he would conquer us?!” The person snorted, then turned to address the crowd behind himself. “The Sects didn’t stand for Wen RuoHan, they won’t stand for ChunYu-Jun either!”

“The Sects? Which Sects don’t have an involvement in this? Wei WuXian is from the Jiang Sect, I am from the Jin Sect, and I’ve stopped counting the Lan by my side a long time ago! Even Nie MingJue contributed to this – who are you to make judgement? All your Sects are guilty in this. Who dares to say they are not?!” There was a pause, then he went on: “Besides, look around! Who is standing with us? Don’t you know Lan WangJi, Lan XiChen’s integrity? If we were the enemy and tyrants, would they stand with us?”

“But we also know about Wei WuXian’s nature as well as ChunYu-Jun’s! And you, even back then, during the lectures, you have been unpleasant!” Jin Ling’s hands clenched into fists then, but he didn’t say anything.

“What of Wei WuXian’s nature?!” This was Jiang Cheng, equaling in loudness with Jin Ling. “What do you know about him?!”

“He is ill tempered and had offended the Jin Sect multiple times. In fact, he was one of the first people to get punished by the Lan – along with ChunYu-Jun, I’ve heard! Everyone knows this about him!”

“Then you know nothing!” Jiang Cheng argued angrily.

“Why are you so afraid to say his name, huh?” Jin Ling. “You call him by his title instead of his name, is Lan SiZhui, a single man, so scary for you?!”

“Then call him properly then! Call him Wen SiZhui!”

“Yes! According to Young Master Jin ZiXun, whom he himself killed, he was closely associating with the Wen! And we all heard what Wen Chao said in this very place. He stood where you are and told us about Wen SiZhui’s involvement in his escape from the Cloud Recesses. As well as his involvement in Wen RuoHan coming into possession of the Yin Iron Shards. He didn’t kill Wen Chao when he had the chance, more so, he didn’t kill Wen RuoHan either. Did he even kill anyone during the Sunshot Campaign?”

“Again with these old rumors, aren’t you tired of it?! Wen Chao was a dog, even Lan SiZhui said so. Sect Leader Jiang knows this as well, or are you not going to believe him either?”

“MouShi, you are truly vile! Clearly, Sect Leader Jiang is here to defend Wei WuXian, he even injured his own wife to do so – yet you drag him into this discussion?!” At this, Wei WuXian’s eyes widened next to Lan SiZhui and he looked around, clearly looking for the Jiang Sect heads.

“Also, SiZhui wasn’t the one to kill Jin ZiXun.” Lan JingYi joined the discussion. “It was me and Jin Ling who did so.”

“Does it really matter?” Jin Ling huffed, sounding annoyed.

“Jin Ling.” This was Lan XiChen’s gently scolding voice. Jin Ling ignored him and continued:

“So, in your place, instead of believing rumors that have hardly any basis, I’d start thinking with my own head! You don’t look particularly smart, but even you could see that even Sect Leader Jin had been fond of Lan SiZhui. You know his reputation as one of the Six Heroes of the Sunshot Campaign as well. If he is that corrupted, what do you think his motivation could be to be that way?”

“Naturally, he wants more power!” Someone else shouted in confidently.

“Fucking idiot!” Jin Ling shot the person down right away harshly. “Someone with Lan SiZhui’s personality you think would want power? What for? The most he could do with it would be to give it to other people. Or what else could he do with it? He hates attention and gets nervous when people force him to make decisions.” He paused. “No, I know what he would do. He would buy rabbits that are to be butchered!”

“Enough of this type of talk!” Jin GuangShan, whom Lan SiZhui haven’t seen during the fight, now said from the middle of the battlefield. His robes were clearly in better shape than the others’. There was not a speck of dirt, not a drop of blood on his robes, unlike Lan JingYi’s, who was now clutching his arm painfully. “MouShi, I don’t actually know what you all are trying to prove at this point.” He spread his arms. “Clearly, this issue is way past the discussion we’ve been having about whether the Wen are innocent or not. ChunYu-Jun, this outburst just now proved that we cannot leave you in possession of the Yin Iron shard. Hand it over at once.”

“Lan SiZhui, Sect Leader Jin had offered this several times now, just take the deal and spare your, and your friends’ lives!” Clan Leader Yao called out. Lan SiZhui tried to flex his fingers, to play a score, to punish these people, but Lan JingYi took Hudie from him and he couldn’t move anyways, so he opted to glaring at the Yao Clan Leader instead.

“I have a different proposal.” Wei WuXian spoke up next to him, then stepped forward, holding up his hand. Above it, the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s half spun lazily. “Sect Leader Nie, since last time it was you who destroyed the Yin Iron shards, may we borrow Baxia again?” He asked. Jin GuangShan seemed annoyed.

“Wei WuXian, we’ve talked about this! There are people who have suffered the effects of the Yin Iron, especially after this fight today.” He gestured around to the various people on the ground, either dead or clearly affected by the resentful energy. “Don’t they deserve to be cured first?”

“Sect Leader Jin, since you didn’t understand the first time, let me demonstrate it to you.” Wei WuXian said, his tone clearly frustrated. He raised his flute to his lips and began playing.

“He’s attacking again!” Someone called out.

“Kill him before he could kill us!” Another cried.

A person actually notched an arrow and let it loose towards Wei WuXian, however, before it could hit the other man, a blue sword glare shot out and stopped it. Everyone looked to the side, where Lan WangJi sheathed his sword without a glance at any of them.

“Hanguang-Jun, what should we make of this?!” Someone asked. “Are you also on the side of the demonic cultivators?”

“How is the Lan Sect going to retaliate?!”

Before they could question Lan XiChen, however, one of the people on the ground stood. It was a puppet, though since no one gave it any instructions, so far it was just standing there. Wei WuXian stopped playing and looked around.

“Of the lot of you, who had a relative or friend who had been attacked by Wen RuoHan’s Yin Iron?” Wei WuXian asked the crowd. The people looked around amongst themselves. Wei WuXian huffed. “I’ll ask differently then. Who had felt the energies of those puppets created by Wen RuoHan?”

“I’ve been personally affected and also monitored my disciples while they recovered.” Nie MingJue stepped forward. Wei WuXian nodded and gestured towards the puppet.

“Sect Leader Nie, could you please examine this puppet and tell me what you sense?”

“Mn.” Nie MingJue nodded, then stomped over, people getting out of his way. He arrived by the puppet and after a moment of watching it, he reached out and examined it. While he did that, Wei WuXian spoke up again:

“To the puppets created by Wen RuoHan’s cultivation techniques, there are multiple stages to it. The first is when they are just affected by the Yin Iron, but not controlled. This is a very weak hold the Yin Iron has on the person, but it’s effective enough; because of this, the person will attack anything, but won’t know who it is they attack. The next one is when they are controlled by the Yin Iron but still have their own consciousness. This is the most common stage. Only those who we fought in the Nightless City and those who had been affected by the Yin Iron the longer are the ones we know of who had entered the last stage. That is when their will is completely destroyed, and the person transforms entirely to obey the Yin Iron’s will. They are incurable.”



“That is correct!” Someone called out, and Lan SiZhui saw as several Lan disciples turned to look at one of their own, who seemed embarrassed. “What? He is right and it’s not common knowledge, I just thought I’d confirm it.”

“A-Li, next time stay in the library instead of coming along, alright?” One of his disciple mates asked. Before this little episode could get out of hand, the focus shifted back to Nie MingJue.

“Well?” Jin GuangShan asked, clearly having lost his patience at this point. Nie MingJue turned towards him, then looked towards Lan XiChen before he answered:

“This puppet definitely lost its will.”

“That is correct, and I only raised it a couple minutes ago. Since this stage requires the puppet to have been subjected to the Yin Iron’s resentful energy for months, if not longer, the conclusion is clear. The Stygian Tiger Amulet, while in fact, originated from the Yin Iron, is different. It had been refined by an unknown person before, and I also refined it further when I transformed it into the Amulet.”

At this, a lot of people cried out in alarm.

“Wei WuXian!” Someone spoke louder. “What do you mean you were the one who refined it?! Isn’t this thing Lan SiZhui’s spiritual tool?!”

“Ah?!” Wei WuXian looked around, his expression mocked hurt. “Sir, Lan SiZhui is a Lan disciple, and while he uses musical cultivation to control the resentful energy, he would never dare to do such thing! The Stygian Tiger Amulet is my invention.” He told them, almost proudly, tapping his own chest with his flute twice, though there was some shame in this gesture as well. “However, I’ve refined this tool to aid us during the Sunshot Campaign. Since it served its purpose, there’s no need to keep it anymore. The people affected by this tool are definitely too far gone to bring back. There’s no point keeping the shard, especially since we know what happened in the past. Who’s to stop another Wen RuoHan, who would steal the shards and use them to rule the world?” He looked around. “Friends, I apologize. I should’ve destroyed this tool the moment it lost its purpose. I have no excuse, only that I was too proud to hand it over. However, since it caused so many issues, I’d like to see it gone. Preferably right here, in front of everyone.” He gestured right in front of himself.

“Ah, Young Master Wei.” Jin GuangYao stepped forward from behind his father, who glanced over at him annoyed, but didn’t say anything. “Since you already agreed to destroy it, there’s no need to rush. The experts could take a look at this tool and decide if it’s true the people affected cannot be helped.”

“Jin GuangYao!” Jin Ling exclaimed, a little too angrily for someone seemingly not having any connection to the man or beef with him from before. People looked over, surprised. “Wei WuXian already demonstrated the puppets cannot be helped. Don’t be a scheming snake and accept the facts. Let us see the shard destroyed, since that’s the goal of the Jin Sect as well. Or would you rather take it back to your watchtower in Qiongqi?!” At this, Jin GuangYao’s eyes widened, but he quickly regained his composure and bowed towards Jin Ling. Before he

could say anything, Jin GuangShan huffed, annoyed, ready to speak; however, he was cut off as well.

“Why don’t we vote about this?” Jin ZiXuan suddenly spoke up. Everyone fell quiet at this.

“Young Master Jin, what do you mean by that?” Someone asked.

“Since Sect Leader Lan is obviously on ChunYu-Jun’s side, with the Jin Sect Leader against, and we haven’t heard from the Nie and Jiang Sects yet, wouldn’t it be wiser to know who’s the cultivation world in favor of?” He said without hesitation. Wei WuXian frowned at him but didn’t say anything. However, Jin GuangShan did, after a long pause.

“So be it.” He nodded, then turned to the people. “Those in favor of destroying the Yin Iron shard here and now, raise your hands!”

Several hands were raised, though it was hard to tell if there were more up than not. What surprised Lan SiZhui was that both Jiang Cheng and Jin ZiXuan’s hands were also in the air, as well as Madam Yu’s. There was a beat of silence, then someone spoke up:

“The ratio is rather balanced. How should we decide now?”

“This is fucking ridiculous.” Jin Ling muttered under his breath. “Are you idiots?!” He called out. “We’re offering to destroy the Yin Iron now. Once it is out in the world, even in the hands of a revered Sect, anyone could get it. Just look at the Jin Sect’s recent failure; they’ve claimed there was a letter telling the Jin Sect Lan SiZhui was in the Wen village against his will, and yet this letter was stolen. Don’t you understand?! As long as the Yin Iron exists, there will always be a threat of it getting into the wrong hands.”

“MouShi, what about—”

“What about the people it affected, yes, we’ve heard this argument a thousand times before! Wei WuXian just proved they cannot be helped, but even if they could, would you risk it getting into the wrong hands in the meantime? Isn’t it better if we destroy it now, when we can make sure nobody is going to use it like Wen RuoHan had? Think about this and vote after!”

“But MouShi, you say we shouldn’t risk it getting into the wrong hands. What do you mean? Did ChunYu-Jun not use this tool to end thousands of lives so far?!”

“Yes!” Jin Ling snapped, irritated. “Fine! If that’s your perspective, think about it this way; you don’t want Lan SiZhui to use this tool further, do you?!”

To that, nobody could say anything. Jin Ling turned to his father and gestured. Jin ZiXuan turned to the crowd. “How about now?” He asked, and several hands shot up – including some that haven’t before. With this, there were slightly more people in favor of destroying the Stygian Tiger Amulet.

“Alright then, it’s decided.” Wei WuXian said. “Sect Leader Nie?” Nie MingJue looked around him, his gaze seemingly searching something or suspicious. Then, with a last glance

towards Lan XiChen, he headed towards them, Baxia gripped strongly in his hand.

“Wait!” Lan JingYi exclaimed suddenly, and everyone froze. Lan JingYi looked over at Lan SiZhui. “Promise you won’t do something stupid?” He asked. Since Lan SiZhui had no means to nod or talk, he could only blink. “Alright.” With that, Lan JingYi quickly got behind him.

“Hey!” Jin Ling called out. “What are you doing?!”

“Letting him kill us all.” Lan JingYi answered, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he removed the talisman. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath, stretching his back.

“Great.” Jin Ling answered with a roll of his eyes.

“I’m asking him a question, you idiot. I took away Hudie, it’s not like he can attack us now.” Lan JingYi grumbled back, then appeared in front of Lan SiZhui. “SiZhui, are you alright?” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer. He wanted to ask the same thing, glancing down at Lan JingYi’s shoulder, but his friend caught his look. “I’m fine. I’ll heal. And we’ll make sure you’re also going to get better, alright?”

“Ask that question already!” Jin Ling snapped from behind him, his arms crossed over his chest, not looking at them. Lan JingYi sighed, then turned back to Lan SiZhui.

“SiZhui, you’re the one who knows this method the best of all of us. I’ve heard rumors in the past that the YiLing Patriarch died because he destroyed his tool.”

“Ah?” Wei WuXian leaned towards them, seemingly curious.

“Wei WuXian, stop eavesdropping! This is none of your business!” Jin Ling snapped, even though he was still not looking towards any of them.

“How can I not hear, I’m standing right here!” Wei WuXian said back. Jin Ling huffed, but didn’t say more. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes and sighed, then continued.

“SiZhui, do you know if this is true? If we destroy the Amulet, will it kill... Any of you?”

Lan SiZhui licked his dry lips, though it helped very little, because a moment later they were dry again.

“Why are you asking him? He’s not the one who knows most about those times.” Jin Ling frowned at Lan JingYi’s back, though his eyes avoided Lan SiZhui.

“Because while you know what your uncles told you, you don’t know the YiLing Patriarch’s side. Besides, Lan SiZhui is the one who invented demonic cultivation methods this time around, so now he’s the person who understands these methods the most.”

“There are two experts standing here though, you could’ve asked Wei WuXian.” Jin Ling grumbled.

“Oh, grow up. You said hurtful things a thousand times over to all of us, tasting your own cooking will not kill you.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “And as I said, we need someone who also has knowledge of the past.”

“The Amulet is capable of it.” Lan SiZhui said, not waiting for Jin Ling’s answer. He glanced over at Wei WuXian. “But I don’t think that will be the case now.”

“Why not?” Wei WuXian asked, tilting his head to the side.

“Even though I don’t think Se—the person Lan JingYi mentioned died because he destroyed his tool, it could have killed him. The Yin Iron works this way: Xue ChongHai, figuring he couldn’t use it’s spiritual energy, tainted it instead. He sacrificed thousands and trapped their resentful spirits within the Yin Iron. When a shard is destroyed, these spirits are freed from the trap of the Yin Iron, but since most of the time that is not entirely the source of their resentment, they’re not actually liberated. That comes after the source of their resentment is solved. If it doesn’t, they need to be suppressed or eliminated.”

Wei WuXian nodded, but it wasn’t him who spoke, but Nie MingJue.

“These are the methods we learn. But when Wen RuoHan’s shards were destroyed, it neither killed me, nor freed resentful spirits.”

“That’s not exactly right.” Lan JingYi said. “The resentful spirits back then were freed and liberated.”

“Why?” Nie MingJue frowned.

“My theory is that most of this resentment depends on the user.” Lan SiZhui said. “Xue ChongHai was the one who trapped them there, but he was killed, that resentment gone. But then the Yin Iron hadn’t been destroyed, but broken into pieces and put into the strong positive spiritual spots of the five Sects. With this, the five Sects might’ve hoped to cleanse the artefact, but with resentment of this volume, it wouldn’t be cleansed like this in a million years. So, they left the resentful spirits there for hundreds of years, not freeing them, which resulted in even more resentment building up in the ghosts. Then, Wen RuoHan began using them to his own advantage and they were forced to do his bidding once more. With him as their master, there was resentment there also. With Wen RuoHan being killed, that resentment was gone. Now the only one was that the resentful spirits were trapped.”

“When Sect Leader Nie destroyed the shards, he also freed them, liberating them from the source of their resentment.” Lan JingYi caught on. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“It is possible that some remained, unable to let go of their resentment. However, Sect Leader Nie went to the Cloud Recesses and went into seclusion to be cleansed of the suffered effects of the Yin Iron, so did most of those who were present that day. The remaining ghosts would not have enough energy to fight against not only the strong aura of the cultivators but also the positive energies of the Cold Pond Cave.”

“But then, the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s master is Wei WuXian.” Lan JingYi nodded. “So, when we destroy the Amulet, who knows how they will react.” Lan SiZhui nodded this time.

“It’s possible they turn against him and tear him apart.”

“If we suppress or eliminate them while this goes on, would that solve this issue?” Lan XiChen asked next. Lan SiZhui shrugged his shoulders.

“It depends on the killing intent of the resentful spirits. If it is too strong within them, it wouldn’t do much.”

“What else could we do?” Lan JingYi asked. Lan SiZhui looked around, then decided it was pointless to hold back his opinion at this point, so he said:

“I could call them to myself.”

“What?!” Jin Ling whirled on him, eyes wide. “Are you out of your mind?!”

“I think we’ve established that.” Lan SiZhui said coldly. Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui sighed, impatient. “Unless anyone else has the means to control the resentful energy... We could try to suppress or eliminate them. If it doesn’t work, brother Wei will die. If I call them to myself, nobody gets hurt.”

“For now!” Jin Ling snapped. “Until you lose it again. Not even mentioning your condition. How much more resentful energy can you take until it kills you?!”

“Does it matter if it kills me?” Lan SiZhui asked calmly, feeling bone-tired. Of arguing, of being here. Of not being able to protect those he loves. He glanced at Lan JingYi’s shoulder again, a proof of his failure, of the effect he had on people’s lives.

“That’s it.” Jin Ling glared at him, swinging Huangfeng onto his back in a smooth motion, taking his sleeves and looking for a string to tie them up with. “Which leg did Wen Xu break? I’ll break the other one. Tell me.” He stepped closer, but Lan JingYi stepped in his way, his hand on the other’s chest.

“Jin Ling, we don’t have time for this.”

“I have time to break his leg anytime I wish. Let me there. He must’ve forgotten what it feels like. I’ll happily remind him.”

“You’re not going to break his leg.”

“You think I’m not serious?”

“I know you are. That vein in your forehead is popping.”

“You—”

“SiZhui, you forget I’m also able to control it.” Wei WuXian said from the side. The three of them looked over. “We will try ZeWu-Jun’s methods first. If it doesn’t work, I’ll call them to myself.”

“Calling them to yourself would be useless when they’re trying to get to you in the first place. The point is not to let them get to you. You don’t have a spiritual tool to shield you.” Lan SiZhui frowned. Wei WuXian cocked an eyebrow.

“Yours was taken away as well. Besides... This time around, I have a very strong Golden Core. Even if the resentful energy attacks me, I’ll be able to take it.”

“Don’t be so cocky!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “Why did I even agree to take you with me here?!”

“Because you don’t have your sword and can’t fly!” Wei WuXian grinned.

“Asshole.” Jin Ling glared and Lan JingYi reached out, swatting him upside the head. This froze the air around them, and Lan JingYi quickly stepped away.

“Ah, sorry, sorry!” He was quick to say. Jin Ling’s wide-eyed glare turned on him. “It was instinct, I didn’t mean to! It’s just, this language is forbidden in the Lan Sect, and—”

“Lan JingYi, if you touch me ever again, rest assured, it won’t just be your leg I’m breaking. And have no doubt I’m being serious this time around. Remember who my family is.” Jin Ling told him scarily without emotion. Lan JingYi quickly bowed low.

“Sure, sure, Sect—Ah, Young Master Jin. Forgive me, forgive me!”

There was a pause, then Lan XiChen pointedly cleared his throat. “Then, me and WangJi will play. MingJue, when we say, destroy the Amulet.”

“Mn.” Nie MingJue nodded, swinging Baxia up, so it was ready to strike. Wei WuXian stepped back, also taking out his flute, while directing the Stygian Tiger Amulet between himself and Nie MingJue. Lan XiChen began to play on Liebing, while Lan WangJi plucked the strings to his guqin. The practiced notes sounded from them effortlessly. Lan SiZhui briefly wondered how often the brothers night-hunted together to fall into the routine so smoothly.

Before they reached the notes that would be most effective, Lan WangJi looked up. Nie MingJue’s hold on Baxia flexed and Lan WangJi nodded wordlessly signaling him. Nie MingJue swung.

Lan SiZhui was unconscious at the time when the Yin Iron shards that had been in Wen RuoHan’s possession were destroyed, so he never saw this happen. Baxia’s sword spirit was stronger than any cultivator’s spiritual tool, however. The Nie Sect’s unique cultivation technique mastered the art of the saber, building it up to a point where it was almost dangerous to wield such strong weapons. As the blade collided with the Stygian Tiger Amulet, there was a struggle, as the resentful energy pushed back against the Sect Leader’s spiritual energy. Lan SiZhui watched, paralyzed as resentful energy exploded from the half of Stygian Tiger amulet.

For a long moment, nothing moved, Lan SiZhui felt like. Black smoke emerged around the spot where the two tools met, jerking, pushing back against Baxia. Every other sound silenced as sharp screams rose at once, assaulting Lan SiZhui’s hearing. He felt it too, the

pain and relief, the struggle. The resentment lingering, liberating, fighting against the brutal spiritual energy of Baxia, but also in a hurry to get free from the Stygian Tiger Amulet's prison.

After the moment, it all turned towards Wei WuXian. Lan SiZhui didn't have time to think, didn't even realize he reacted before Wei WuXian even raised his flute to his lips. He jumped over Lan JingYi, besting him in his surprise in seconds. Hudie was with him within moments. His fingers moved on their own accord, his own resentful tool calling for the others.

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi shouted, but Lan SiZhui couldn't afford the distraction as he played.

The next moment, the sound of the flute joined the guqin strings' strumming and the battle of wills began. Lan SiZhui played for the resentment to come to him, to trap it into his own half of the Stygian Tiger Amulet, while Wei WuXian played to keep the killing intent away from them both. Eventually, another tune joined them, another flute, another guqin. Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi played to eliminate the resentful energy. Lan SiZhui switched into the song he used to repress the energy in the Burial Mounds.

It took a while. It took a long time, but in the end, the three forces were too much for the resentful energy, the notes too effective. With a final rush of screams and pain, it evaporated into nothingness, leaving Lan SiZhui exhausted and sore in every single cell of his body. He fell onto his knees panting.

"SiZhui!"

"Are you alright?" Two people rushed over, supporting him. Someone took his guqin away again, most likely Lan JingYi, but Lan SiZhui was too tired to take offense of that. Lan SiZhui felt nauseous and breathless. He nodded without looking up.

"It's over then." Wei WuXian announced loudly. At this, multiple people cried out in joy.

## Sorrow III.

“The last shard of the Yin Iron had been destroyed.” Said Wei WuXian. Lan SiZhui looked up and over, confused. Wei WuXian knew he also had the other half of the Stygian Tiger Amulet. He was sure just now multiple people also saw it. Why did he say this then? However, people didn’t call him out on it. They didn’t say they saw another shard with ChunYu-Jun. They didn’t accuse them of hiding more.

“What is he playing at?” Jin Ling asked lowly, so only the three of them could hear, from where he held Lan SiZhui under the arm.

“So, it is.” Jin GuangShan answered, though he didn’t sound pleased about it. “Finally, this chapter in our lives is over.”

“Sect Leader Jin, what about the Wen?” Someone asked from the crowd.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Jin Ling muttered before rising, letting go of Lan SiZhui and stepping forward. “What about them, huh?!”

“They’re still out there, MouShi!” They said. “They are still criminals on the run!”

“Are you stupid?!” Jin Ling asked back. At this, no one answered, then eventually:

“What do you mean, MouShi?”

“Do you even know who you killed just now?!” Jin Ling asked, gesturing towards the bodies where Wen Ning had been held before. Where Wen Qing still laid. Lan SiZhui turned away. “Do you not even know who she was?!”

“Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi warned. Jin Ling whirled on him, his glare sharp. Lan JingYi made a motion with his head and Jin Ling glanced at Lan SiZhui before fixing his glare on Lan JingYi.

“I won’t spare his feelings, just because he’s mourning.” He said, not looking at Lan SiZhui.

“You really are a piece of work, Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi told him, heated. “I know you’re not a nice person, but being cruel is not you.”

“Who’s being cruel, when just minutes ago, he threw all those things at my head?!” Jin Ling stepped towards them. “Why should I care, when he doesn’t?!”

“He cares, you know that.” Lan JingYi told him. “You know why he is like this.”

“I know.” Jin Ling scoffed. “But of course, we should just forgive him because of this. Because he is Lan SiZhui, ChunYu-Jun, who is so kind and perfect.”

“Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi gritted his teeth. “Stop it.”



“Like you’re so much better.” Jin Ling told him. “You say I should mind his feelings, who ever minded my feelings, huh?”

“We do nothing but that.” Lan JingYi grumbled, annoyed.

“Do you? Spare his feelings, you say, who spares my feelings? Who spared them when my uncle died? Everyone was so ready to tell me how I should feel, yet they have no idea how I feel.”

“Who ever assumes your feelings? You’re always ready to voice them.” Lan JingYi sighed. “Why is this about you again?” He asked, though he was quiet enough Lan SiZhui was sure the other boy didn’t hear it.

“Everyone assumes!” Jin Ling snapped, throwing his hands up.

“What everyone are you talking about?!” Lan JingYi asked, helplessly.

“Everyone! You! Him! My uncle, the elders, even Nie HuaiSang came to express his condolences, not towards me, no! No, it must be Sect Leader Lan who’s heartbroken, to find out his sworn brother had been the evil mastermind behind the downfall of the cultivation world. My job must be so hard, having to undo his schemes! Whenever uncle visits or I visit him, I dare mention my uncle, he is so quick to correct me! Why am I still listening to my uncle’s teachings? Why am I not hunting the snakes in the Sect he must’ve hidden there?! Who am I to mourn him when he was nothing but evil!”

“That’s them, when have we ever said such things to you?!” Lan JingYi glared at him. “It was always you who brought him up, who badmouthed him. We never want to bring it up, because we know you’re sad about this, have you any right to mention us amongst those people then?!”

“You—!” Jin Ling cut himself off, glaring without saying anything, much like whenever he realized the other person was right and he had no good argument to throw at them. In the background, they heard someone say:

“Young Master Jin, what events is this boy talking about?” This was Clan Leader Yao, leaning close to speak to Jin ZiXuan. The Jin Sect heir huffed with the air of someone who had to endure Jin Ling’s nonsense for a long time now.

“I have long given up on trying to make sense of his ranting. As long as he’s not shouting into my face, I usually don’t even listen to what he’s saying.”

“Hey!” Jin Ling whirled and glared at his father, who just cocked an eyebrow.

“Jin Ling, you’re clearly having issues with your friends. Can we get back to the topic at hand?”

“How dare you!”

“He’s right, MouShi!” Someone called out. “What about the Wen dog we killed?”

“Watch your mouth!” Jin Ling snapped at them, then huffed and said: “She was not just any Wen, in case you didn’t know. She was Wen Qing, the Wen Clan’s Clan Leader.”

“She was?” Multiple people voiced their surprise.

“Yes!” Jin Ling answered, finally having calmed down. He straightened and continued. “Since you’ve been concerned about the Wen because of a possible conspiracy, now you can rest assured. After having killed their leader, who would conspire against you?!”

“What about their previous crimes? Should they not answer those?”

“What crimes, do you mean?” Jin Ling asked back challengingly.

“They attacked Sect Leader Jin’s men in their village, when they went to retrieve ChunYu-Jun!” Another person chimed in, so Jin Ling looked towards them.

“After they were attacked?! It was self-defense! Or should I also hold you accountable for the wounds I’ve endured in this fight just now?!”

“MouShi, you attacked us, naturally, we were defending ourselves!” Said the original person who asked the question.

“Then, you understand the Wen’s situation! They were attacked; should they have laid on the ground and slit their own throats for the Jin?”

“What about Qiongqi? They also escaped from their trial!” Yet another person called out. Jin Ling at this point gave up on turning to them and faced only Jin GuangShan as he answered.

“That is on Lan SiZhui, not the Wen! Lie to my face and tell me; if you were imprisoned and facing a death sentence, would you have refused to escape if someone opened your cell door?”

“They were not facing a death sentence though!”

“Yes, well, let’s blame Lan SiZhui for that also; even Sect Leader Lan told him the trial would be in their favor, but because he became paranoid and wasn’t thinking clearly, he went to free them.” Jin Ling said, the eyeroll clear in his voice.

“They still escaped with him though!”

“Look at your own frightened face just now, would you say no if ChunYu-Jun told you to do something?” Lan SiZhui liked this less and less, though as long as the Wen were left alone, he’d happily take the blame.

“Then...” The person trailed off, unable to bring up anything else. Jin Ling waited another long moment, then looked around.

“So, should we also vote about this, or can you comprehend this without that?!”

“MouShi,” Clan Leader Yao begun, “even though your reasoning is sound, it is still not you who decides these things. Since Sect Leader Jin was the one who suffered the most from these events, he should be the one to decide.”

“That’s right!” Multiple people agreed to that, then turned to Jin GuangShan, who looked around them with a displeased expression. He didn’t say anything for a long time, then sighed softly.

“Since everyone seems to agree, I’m also willing to let this matter drop.”

“Sect Leader Jin is truly generous!”

“MouShi, you should thank your Sect Leader, look how he’s doting on you!”

Lan SiZhui watched as Jin GuangYao stepped over and whispered something in Jin GuangShan’s ears. The Jin Sect Leader frowned and nodded.

“However, despite all this, there’s also something else that needs to be discussed.” Jin GuangShan called out, silencing the murmuring crowd. Jin Ling heaved a sigh so heavy, Lan SiZhui was sure it could be heard on the other side of the courtyard. Jin ZiXuan’s disapproving gaze was on him for a moment, then returned to his father’s form.

“What is it, Sect Leader Jin?” Clan Leader Yao asked earnestly, surely waiting for another debate to start.

“Even though the Yin Iron is destroyed and the Clan Leader Wen is dead, hence the Wen are no longer a threat, there is still a dangerous person in our midst.” He looked over at Lan SiZhui sharply. “While I do not fear Wei WuXian, since he has Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu to answer to, Lan SiZhui, you’ve parted from your Sect and nobody else takes responsibility for your actions. You’ve killed thousands and held the cultivation world in terror. For this offense we killed your uncle, Wen RuoHan.”

“Who exactly killed Wen RuoHan?” Jin Ling asked, his face hard. This was though the wrong thing to say.

“MouShi.” Jin GuangShan took a deep breath and turned towards Jin Ling with a stern look. He looked like Grandmaster Lan when he was dealing with an especially difficult person. “So far I have not acknowledged your role in all of this because my son is fond of you, but I didn’t forget about it.”

“So what?” Jin Ling frowned, looking genuinely clueless. Lan SiZhui had the urge to hold his forehead.

Even though Jin Ling was in a slightly more unique position than the two Lan, regarding their place in their Sect, in the eyes of these people, he was just a Jin disciple gone rouge. However, in Jin Ling’s eyes, he was the Sect Leader in the future, therefore he didn’t feel like he was answering anyone in the past. This led to a strange dynamic, where he felt entitled to things a simple disciple was not. Even during the Sunshot Campaign, he stayed with the Jin rather because he wanted to protect Jin ZiXuan than that he felt he belonged there. Lan

SiZhui's gaze flickered towards Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu. There was also that. Jin Ling in the past listened to his grandmother because she had the same temper as Jiang WanYin in the future. Lan SiZhui wondered if it was Madam Yu who confronted Jin Ling about what he'd done, would he also just ask: 'So what'?

"So what?" Jin GuangShan asked slowly, turning fully towards Jin Ling. His anger was apparent. Lan SiZhui wanted to warn him, but he knew Jin Ling wouldn't appreciate the intrusion. He saw the same thought on Lan JingYi.

"So what?" Jin Ling repeated. "Who are you to judge me?"

Lan SiZhui always knew Jin Ling disliked his grandfather – even before they arrived to the past. Though Lan SiZhui didn't know specifics, he knew Sect Leader Jiang – Jiang WanYin, that is – sometimes mentioned the man to his nephew. Clearly, not favorably.

"Jin Ling, even though you're one of the celebrated heroes of the Sunshot Campaign and I call you by your title, it is purely because I'm proud of your accomplishments and not because you're above me. You're still a Jin Sect disciple and I'm still the Jin Sect Leader."

"Ah, Jin Ling!" Wei WuXian called out, but Jin Ling held out his bow without looking over, a gesture to hush Wei WuXian. Strangely, it worked, a strange, curious look overcoming Wei WuXian – as if he was also curious what came of this debate. While he clearly wanted to defend Jin Ling and prevent him from making a mistake arguing with his Sect Leader, they couldn't forget Wei WuXian's curiosity about the three juniors' origins. He likely held himself back because he wanted to know what relationship Jin Ling had with Jin GuangShan to have been so bold with his actions ever since he arrived to the past.

"Sect Leader Jin, I'm not questioning whether you're the Sect Leader or not." Jin Ling said calmly, but his anger could be heard from his voice, held back by a string of willpower. "I'm questioning your credentials to judge my actions."

"Are they not the same?" Jin GuangShan's eyebrow twitched with annoyance.

"No." Jin Ling scoffed. "They aren't. Even though Lan XiChen is a Sect Leader, he has no right to judge whether Lan JingYi is efficient on the guqin or not, because he himself is not an expert. On the other hand, if Lan WangJi, who is in fact an expert at the guqin, was to judge him, it would be valid."

"That's a horrible example, ZeWu-Jun is more than efficient on the guqin." Lan JingYi argued. Jin Ling let his head fall back, looking at the sky.

"It's alright, I'm not as good as WangJi." Lan XiChen said, and his voice was a little choked, like he was trying to hold back something. Laughter or incredulity, Lan SiZhui couldn't decide, and judging by his expression, Lan XiChen couldn't either.

"Jin Ling, you're walking a fine line, insulting a Sect Leader. Take care not to fall on the wrong side." Wei WuXian said carefully. Jin Ling huffed.

“Sorry, Sect Leader Lan.” Jin Ling said dismissively. Lan XiChen made a face but didn’t answer, didn’t have time to either, because Jin Ling continued. “Since Sect Leader Jin has not experienced what we have, you have no right to judge my actions.” Jin Ling said. “If I want to protect Lan SiZhui, I’ll do so.”

“If not your Sect Leader, then, who has the right to judge you?” Jin GuangShan asked, and let a little more anger seep into his voice and expression. Jin Ling was truly tethering on an edge, though it was a long time coming.

Since they’ve arrived to the past, he had not heeded any discipline from the Jin Sect – he did listen to Lan XiChen, once the other learned the truth, and because of Madam Yu and Jiang WanYin’s similar personalities, he also listened to her, but as far as Jin Ling was concerned, in this world there was no one who had the right to reprimand him for anything. This was, on one hand, expected, since Jin Ling was never one submitting his will for another’s sake, but on the other hand, his lack of humility caused a lot of tension around him and this did not bode well in this world, where people were so harshly judged.

Perhaps, in their own time this was less of an issue, because people knew his history and pitied and indulged him. They also had to duck their heads and submit to Jin Ling’s temper, because he was Sect heir, now Sect Leader. There was not much push-back against his personality, which was also why he became this way. The only one who could truly temper him was his uncle, but even Jiang WanYin did not discipline him as he could, since Jin Ling was not the Jiang Sect heir but the Jin’s. To discipline another Sect’s disciple, much less Sect heir... Even if partially Jiang WanYin was raising Jin Ling, he could only do so much before he crossed a line.

However, in this time, Nie MingJue was the Nie Sect Leader, sure-handed, opinionated and well-adjusted. Jin GuangShan was the Jin Sect Leader, confident and prideful, but also well-established and seasoned. Jiang FengMian was the Jiang Sect Leader, and while he was mellow in nature and not quick to anger, once he drew the line, he kept to it with iron will and plentiful of experience. He also had Madam Yu at his side. Lan XiChen, while Lan SiZhui would’ve believed was a pushover in the past, since he got to know and see him during the Sunshot Campaign, he learned that the Lan Sect Leader was also confident and well-adjusted, and while also mellow in nature, he was fierce in matters he considered worthy of his temper.

Jin Ling had been tested on his humility ever since they got here – that no one recognized him as a Sect Leader, people calling him a temperamental person who was unpleasant to be around, that the Sect Leaders also handled him as the child he was... Jin Ling’s patience only stretched so thin before it snapped. That is to say, Lan SiZhui also saw how this experience influenced Jin Ling as well. He was more thoughtful and also began to use his own resources rather than depending on others doing everything for him.

His venture into tactics and strategy not only benefited him as a war hero, it would also aid him greatly in Sect politics and on his night-hunts as well. The fact that he worked so closely with not one Sect Leader during this time also meant that his examples of Sect Leaders expanded greatly, offering a good learning opportunity for once he became Sect Leader. While Lan SiZhui didn’t know how it was like to lead a Sect, he had been helping here and

there ZeWu-Jun of his time, then recently in a greater extent Hanguang-Jun as well. He didn't have great insight, but he had an idea of what leading a Sect entailed.

However, since they've returned to the past, Jin Ling also got the treatment he – Lan SiZhui thought – appreciated from his friends; not being pitied for being an orphan and having the responsibility of a Sect on his shoulder. This meant Jin Ling, for the first time in his life, had someone else to answer to properly, even if Sect Leader Jin wasn't his actual Sect Leader, in this world, it was viewed this way.

To question the credentials of a Sect Leader was not a good move. Jin Ling had to answer well, or he would be estranged from his Sect – which wouldn't affect him as much as others thought it would, but it would also make him a target for hatred as Lan SiZhui was. This did not sit well with him. He didn't want to drag anyone down with himself, this was why he cut off his friends and went to get the Wen on his own, this was the reason he advocated against Wei WuXian using demonic cultivation.

Lan SiZhui waited, just like everyone else, for Jin Ling's answer with his breath held back.

"The only person who can judge me is my uncle." Jin Ling said in the end, referencing his older martial uncle, and Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a confused look before glancing at Wei WuXian, who caught their eyes and cocked an eyebrow, no doubt curious about the person. Lan SiZhui shook his head and turned back to the discussion.

What did Jin Ling mean by that?

"Your uncle?" Jin GuangShan questioned with a frown.

"Yes." Jin Ling answered confidently this time.

"MouShi, I don't understand!" A person called out. "Who do you mean?"

"It's none of your business!" Jin Ling scoffed.

"If you don't tell us who this person is, why is he the one to be able to judge you?"

"Didn't I just say?! It's none of your business!"

"But MouShi, is this person here now?" Someone else asked.

"Why would I tell you?!"

"But then, MouShi, if this person isn't here, how could he judge you? You're so problematic, Sect Leader Jin is your Sect Leader, why won't you just accept his word?"

"He is not my Sect Leader, that's why!" Jin Ling said pridefully. However, this was a dangerous topic to get into. Lan XiChen must've thought so as well, because his gaze flickered over Jin Ling sharply.

"What do you mean?!" Someone else asked.

“That’s none of your business!” Jin Ling glared at them. “I owe no one an explanation, this is just how it is.”

“MouShi, aren’t you being too much?! How are you even a Jin, I’m ashamed to share this name with you!” Someone from the Jin Sect called out and Jin Ling scoffed.

“Be ashamed then, who cares? Who are you even?!”

“Sect Leader Jin is my fifth cousin twice removed, so I’m of the main family! Who are you?!”

“How is that any of your business?”

“Didn’t I just answer your question? Why won’t you answer mine?!”

“I’m sure it won’t be as impressive as your introduction, fifth twice removed cousin Jin!”

“Was that a joke he said?” Lan JingYi whispered. Lan SiZhui repressed his amusement, this was a serious situation.

“How dare you! Sect Leader Jin, do something!”

“What do you expect him to do, huh?” Wei WuXian called out with a frown.

“Well, since this insolent person refuses to submit to Sect Leader Jin’s punishment, he should banish him from the Sect!” This brought a sudden silence to the battleground. These kind of dismissals of a disciple were not public, much less done on demand. For this fifth twice removed cousin to ask this...

“This is not anyone’s decision but the Sect Leader’s. Jin ZiShang, do not get bold.” Jin ZiXuan actually said frostily, barely looking over his shoulder to address the other person.

“Ah, doesn’t MouShi listen to the Young Master Jin?” Clan Leader Yao suddenly spoke. Everyone looked over. “It’s true, during the Sunshot Campaign, MouShi followed Young Master Jin ZiXuan like a shadow, then there was that incident when the engagement was brought up – I’ve heard they became sworn brothers.”

“Bullshit!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Clan Leader Yao, do you think since MouShi and my son are close, he is going to listen to him?” Jin GuangShan asked with a frown. Lan JingYi looked around, catching Lan XiChen and Lan SiZhui’s eyes. Then, he turned back to the crowd.

“Everyone, why are we talking about Jin Ling? We know he is a temperamental person, but he means no harm.” He said, cutting off Clan Leader Yao’s thoughtful humming.

“Feng CiKe, are you also not in question now?” Clan Leader Yao turned to him. “The five of you have committed these crimes together. Wei WuXian had been dismissed, but ChunYu-Jun also had three other accessories to his crimes – MouShi is one of them, you’re also one of them, and Hanguang-Jun is also one of them.”

“Clan Leader Yao.” Lan XiChen’s frosty tone rose as the man stepped forward, though his pose elegant and effortless, his face was hard-set. Him and his brother were so alike, for a moment, they almost looked identical. “While Lan SiZhui’s case is different, since he parted from the Lan Sect, the others also have their own Sect Leaders to make judgement over them.”

“Sect Leader Lan, naturally, I understand that.” Clan Leader Yao said without any apparent awareness he was walking the knife’s edge. He was just about to judge the Sect Leader’s brother whom everyone knew Lan XiChen was extremely protective of. One could say he ignored the danger on purpose. “But since your own brother is amongst those accused, how could we not question what you’re willing to do about the situation?”

“Clan Leader Yao.” Nie MingJue’s voice sounded suddenly as the man turned to Clan Leader Yao, still holding Baxia, his hair slightly loose from the fight – he looked like a beast unleashed. “To get into a Sect’s inner affairs can be taken as a great offense. I’d watch it.”

“I’m sorry, Sect Leader Nie, Sect Leader Lan,” Clan Leader Yao said with an all-suffering expression, “but isn’t this also our business? These people attacked all of us. While I have no wish to tell Sect Leader Lan how to handle his disciples, I take offense in this attack – can’t I ask for compensation as a Clan Leader?”

“You can ask, however, you didn’t.” Nie MingJue said with a frown. “You’ve critiqued XiChen for not speaking up about his disciples. This is his business to handle.”

“Isn’t time over for pleasantries?” Someone else asked. “We’ve been fighting here for a long time now. We have injured and we’re tired. I say the sooner these people are called out, the better.”

“If you’re tired, go home!” Nie MingJue boomed over the crowd.

“Clan Leader Yao.” Lan XiChen began, his tone would be able to freeze over oceans. “Compensation is due, but it is not your place to decide how I handle the situation. Once I’ve dealt with the inner affairs, you ought to get compensated. Until then, you have no right to chime into this.” At this, Clan Leader Yao looked apprehensive, but he probably realized he was over the line and bowed his head, taking a small step back.

“In that case, Sect Leader Lan, I’ll be awaiting my compensation.” There was an uncomfortable pause, then Lan XiChen looked over the gathered crowd.

“As for Lan SiZhui’s situation... Since he is a former disciple of the Lan Sect, and the events leading up to these actions were under my responsibility, I also feel responsible for this as well. Even though he parted from the Lan Sect a long time ago, as established, his methods can be tied back to his studies in the Cloud Recesses. Since this is the case, I feel the one who should be dealing with him is me.”

“Sect Leader Lan, while I understand where you’re coming from and we appreciate you taking credit for this, this situation is trickier than that. This is no longer the case between a Sect Leader and his disciple.” Jin GuangShan said. “Ah, it’s like this: there was the rouge cultivator Xue Yang, Xue ChengMei. He was arrested for the massacre of the Yueyang Chang



Clan and taken to the Unclear Realm. However, not long after, he had been freed and he escaped. So, for every crime he commits after this, is that Sect Leader Nie's responsibility, since he was the one unable to hold him?"

Multiple people started whispering between themselves, scandalized. For Jin GuangShan to bring up one of Nie MingJue's failures like this, it was more than insulting. Sect Leader Nie glared at the other Sect Leader, but didn't act out, though his hand on Baxia turned white from gripping it so hard.

"Sect Leader Nie, I apologize for the offense." Jin GuangShan said after the initial murmurs died down. "However, you must understand I'm trying to make a point."

"While trying to make one point, you're also making another." Nie MingJue barked, clearly holding back his rage. "Since Xue Yang escaped, the Nie Sect had been hunting for him. If he ever turns up, I will personally cut him down from limb to limb. Do you think Sect Leader Lan also doesn't have the right for his own revenge on Lan SiZhui?"

At this, Lan JingYi's head whipped towards Lan XiChen, but the Sect Leader wasn't looking at them, but at Jin GuangShan calmly.

"Naturally, I understand the need for revenge." Sect Leader Jin said, looking uncomfortable with the idea that Lan XiChen would want revenge. It *was* an unrealistic idea, but Lan XiChen was not protesting against it, therefore the other Sect Leader had no right to reject it. "Ah, since Lan SiZhui's case should be decided between the Sects and Clans, naturally, Sect Leader Lan would also have a say in it."

"Since all of us are here," Nie MingJue began, looking around, then settling his gaze on Jin GuangShan again, "why don't we talk about this? Since XiChen is the party who had been wronged the most by Lan SiZhui's disappointing actions, not only using demonic cultivation and killing hundreds, hurting several people with his methods, but also not disclosing his parting from the Lan Sect before committing these acts, therefore letting everyone take their judgement out on the Lan Sect, it should be him who makes the first demand."

"Sect Leader Nie, while that is all true, the most hurt party here isn't the Jin Sect?" Jin GuangShan made a face somewhere between annoyance and confusion. "Our cultivators had been the main focus of Lan SiZhui's rage. First, they were the ones killed in the Wen village. Then later, at Qiongqi, they were the ones standing guard and hurt for it. Then, after the siege of the Burial Mounds, Jiang, Lan and Nie disciples were the least harmed by his rage. Even just now, look around, what color robes do you see lying on the ground the most?"

"Does Sect Leader Jin not think I can hold him responsible for these crimes?" Lan XiChen asked coldly.

"That is not it, Sect Leader Lan." Jiang FengMian spoke up for the first time with a frown. "Think about this for a moment." He didn't elaborate, and Lan XiChen seemed puzzled.

"Sect Leader Jiang, what do you mean?"

“Since Lan SiZhui is public enemy, how many people can claim they’ve been hurt by him? If you take him back to the Cloud Recesses, people will go over as well and demand their own punishments added to the one you’d rule out. If you refuse, you offend these people. How many offenses would it take for the crowd to turn against the Lan Sect?”

“But naturally, Sect Leader Lan wouldn’t refuse our judgements!” Someone called out, probably a smaller Clan Leader Lan SiZhui wasn’t familiar with. Lan XiChen lowered his eyes and didn’t answer.

“The Lan Sect has strict rules that age back to the founding of the Lan Sect.” Jiang FengMian spoke instead of him. “Naturally, there are rulings the Lan Sect Leader cannot make without violating his own Sect’s rules.”

“In that case, wouldn’t it better to send him to one of the Sects that have no such rules?” Someone else asked. Lan XiChen pressed his lips together.

“Lan SiZhui is formerly a Lan disciple. What other Sect is equipped to handle him properly?!” Wei WuXian called out, frowning deeply.

“That’s right! Which Sect would that be, where Lan SiZhui simultaneously gets the punishment he deserves, but isn’t dealt with unjustly?” Jin Ling joined, scoffing. “The Jin Sect would either kill him or use his cultivation for their own gains. Madam Yu hates him, I don’t even know if she would torture him before killing him eventually.”

“MouShi, speaking against your own Sect like this, aren’t you ashamed?” The fifth twice removed cousin spoke up again. Jin Ling threw a dirty look his way.

“What’s with these Jin cousins, that they’re all so vile?” Lan JingYi whispered while Jin Ling answered:

“Isn’t it true though?”

“Jin Ling, while we appreciate your insight into this case, let me also say this:” Jiang FengMian turned to him, sounding slightly annoyed, “While he is your friend, you’re also guilty of things you’ll have to answer for. I advise you not to speak up during this.”

“That’s right!” Someone called out. “This is a matter the Sect Leaders should decide, MouShi!”

“And we should just sit here and listen to them decide our fate?” Wei WuXian asked. At this, Jiang Cheng also called out:

“Shut up, you idiot, aren’t you in enough trouble?!”

“He might be an idiot, but in this case, he is right.” Jin Ling said. “I’m not going to sit here and take it!”

“What can you do, MouShi?” Someone else asked. “You’ve clearly been defeated!”

“Who said we were defeated?!” Jin Ling asked, his hand flexing on his bow. “I could fight you if I wanted to!”

“Jin Ling,” Lan JingYi spoke up and Jin Ling turned to him with an annoyed expression. “They are trying to solve this without anyone having to fight or die.” He pointedly looked between Wei WuXian and Lan SiZhui. The former looked between them with a look of puzzlement that also held thoughtfulness and approval. Lan SiZhui couldn’t make sense of this, but for now, he didn’t have the means to figure it out. “I say let them.”

“I’m not going to submit to their whims like a child!”

“For once, nobody cares what you want.” Lan JingYi told him. “For once, can’t you just listen to me? We’ve talked about this!” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. They didn’t talk about this... unless Lan JingYi meant the two of them only. That was possible, since they’ve been rather distant since they left the Burial Mounds. Maybe they have been talking about what to do with Lan SiZhui back in the village. While this hurt, and he was upset his friends saw such a problem in him they felt the need to discuss it without him, he could do nothing about it now.

“I won’t let them decide this without my input.” Jin Ling told him, but then he crossed his arms and came over, standing next to Lan SiZhui, looking out at the crowd with a disapproving look. Lan XiChen nodded to them, satisfied that for now, Jin Ling submitted and turned back to the Sects.

“If I take Lan SiZhui back to the Cloud Recesses, he will receive punishment suitable to his crimes.” He paused. “I’ll also hold audience to everyone who wishes to give their input. However, since he is going to be held in the Cloud Recesses, the rules would apply.”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier if he was held in Koi Tower and your input given, Sect Leader Lan?” Jin GuangShan asked.

“Sect Leader Jin, you were the one to point out your hurt in this matter. Since the Jin Sect doesn’t have such strict rules against revenge, what stops those who had been most hurt by Lan SiZhui to take their revenge in an unbecoming manner?” Sect Leader Nie asked after a pause. While this would be a great insult coming from anyone else, since Jin GuangShan also recently insulted Nie MingJue, this was not as bad as it could’ve been. Even Jin GuangShan only looked annoyed he couldn’t get offended.

“What do you propose then, Sect Leader Nie? Should we take him to your Unclear Realm?” He held himself back, but with his previous jab against Nie MingJue, referencing the issue with Xue Yang, everyone knew what he was implying: ‘Where he will likely escape?’

“So, it seems Cloud Recesses remain the only option.” Nie MingJue said.

“What about Lotus Pier?” Wei WuXian asked. At this, Nie MingJue made a face and Jin GuangShan’s expression reflected it as well, likely for different reasons. Next to Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling hissed:

“Are you stupid?! Madam Yu would kill him!”

“I can protect him and isn’t it better if he’s with an ally, than with the Jin?” He asked, making a face at Jin Ling, who glared at him.

“No, if that ally is as clueless and useless as you!”

“Who said I was clueless and useless?” Wei WuXian frowned at Jin Ling, who just brought some air in to speak, but was cut off by the Sect Leader Nie’s speaking.

“No offense to the Jiang Sect of Yunmeng, but the location is also not suitable to keep criminals. The lakes offer too much ground unprotected in case a prisoner is trying to escape.” This was a dangerous thing to say, since the Sect Leader could easily take this as a great offense against its strengths.

“A lot of criminals had been held in the Lotus Pier in the past.” Jiang FengMian said, his tone mild. “While it’s true, what you say about the surrounding area, there are serious wards set up all around. It is not as easy to sneak in and out as some people might think. However, you all know this, since this is taught as part of the history of the great Sects.” He raised his eyebrows at Nie MingJue, who scoffed and shrugged one of his shoulders. “However, the Jiang Sect feels we were not as affected by ChunYu-Jun’s crimes as the other great Sects. We wouldn’t dare intrude on an issue like this.”

There was a long pause when nobody spoke, then Jin GuangShan spoke up again:

“Sect Leader Jiang is well-spoken and generous.” Jin GuangShan nodded to the other man. “We, seasoned Sect Leaders naturally understand the hot-blooded nature of the youth.” He paused, letting the jab sink in to Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen, who exchanged a look, but didn’t speak. “ZeWu-Jun, while I also understand the need for revenge, excuse me for saying this, but isn’t it also in the Lan Sect’s ideals to not take revenge? It had been a while since I’ve studied the traditions of your Sect, but I certainly remember, you yourself are also very much against the idea of revenge. While Chifeng-Zun’s words make sense if he says them about anyone else, I did not get to know you as someone so eager for revenge.”

“It is in the principles.” Lan XiChen admitted. “And I am also not the kind of person who craves revenge.”

“Then, ZeWu-Jun, you must understand my stand as well. ChunYu-Jun committed great crimes against my Sect. Before the Crowd Hunt, if I knew he was no longer associating with the Lan Sect, I’d have no issue punishing him. Since this got delayed, please, allow me to take him back and do so now.”

There was a long pause, when Nie MingJue also looked over at Lan XiChen, everyone waiting for his decision with their breaths held back. To refuse this notion would mean either further negotiations, but also could mean tension between the two major Sects as well. If this got out of hand, it could easily turn into a fight. Lan XiChen had to be smart here, because for an outsider, it made no sense for him to want Lan SiZhui with him. Lan SiZhui knew this was because Lan XiChen knew about where they came from and didn’t want Lan SiZhui to be held to the expectations of this time. But since nobody else knew this, it would look rather strange to demand him now.

Seemingly knowing this, in the end, Lan XiChen made a resigned expression and closed his eyes and inclined his head the smallest movement. Lan JingYi by Lan SiZhui's side cried out.

"ZeWu-Jun, you cannot allow this!" He said in panic, gripping Lan SiZhui tightly.

"JingYi." Lan XiChen said gently, looking over with a pained expression.

"They can't take him!" Lan JingYi protested. Lan XiChen pressed his lips together and shook his head in a helpless gesture. There was nothing he could do. "ZeWu-Jun!" Lan JingYi continued to cry. "What if they figure out—" Before he could continue, however, a silencing spell glued his lips together. Lan JingYi's eyes widened and he looked over at Lan XiChen with wide eyes, but the other turned away.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Lan." Jin GuangShan smiled friendly. "After the dust settled, let us talk once more, like friends again." There was a thinly veiled point in this statement. So, if Lan XiChen refused, there would have been more likely a fight between the main Sects indeed.

Lan XiChen didn't answer, just turned to his disciples. The Lan disciples were quick to catch up with the unsaid command and soon, Lan JingYi was surrounded by Lan disciples on all sides. A few moments later Jin disciples surrounded Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling as well, who still had his bow, his hand flexing on the wood as he glared at the disciples.

There was a moment of chaos in the courtyard. Since the threat had been contained, disciples hurried over to their Sects and Clans, taking their place near their leaders. Several of them asked questions, they overheard as the Nie disciples flocked to Nie MingJue.

"Sect Leader Nie, since we've also been wronged by ChunYu-Jun, what demands are you going to make for his punishment?"

"Yes, Sect Leader Nie! He should've been brought to Unclear Realm. Sect Leader Jin was out of line for suggesting our defense was weak, doesn't he know when Xue ChengMei escaped, we were being attacked by the Wen Sect?!"

"Enough of this." Nie MingJue told them. "What Sect Leader Jin said was inaccurate, but it doesn't give you the right to badmouth him."

"What about the Wen, Sect Leader Nie?" Another disciple asked. "Since we are the ones hunting the escaped criminals, should we go after them?"

"Don't we have enough problems without a bunch of farmers and healers being on the run? Forget about them." Nie MingJue huffed.

"Farmers and healers? But Sect Leader Nie, weren't there cultivators amongst them?"

"Open a history book, A-Chan. The Dafan Wen Clan is known to have sent their cultivators away since the violent death of their previous Clan Leader. Before then they were a cultivation Clan, but since then, they disengaged from the cultivation world." Another disciple told his disciple mate.

“But then, why did the Jin Sect insist on them being criminals?” The previous disciple asked.

“Enough, I said.” Nie MingJue told them sternly. To this, the disciples bowed to him with an apology. Nie MingJue then came over to where Lan XiChen was standing to the side. “XiChen.” He said, then surprisingly, opened his outer robes and removed a talisman from it! Lan XiChen then did the same!

“Thank you, MingJue.” Lan XiChen said, burning the talismans quickly. Nie MingJue looked at him with a frown.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.” He said, glancing over at Lan SiZhui. “However, Sect Leader Jiang was right. Were you to take him home, people would demand their say in this.”

“I know.” Lan XiChen sighed. “As I told you, it wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“Mn.” Nie MingJue nodded, reaching out and catching Lan XiChen’s shoulder, squeezing it. Lan XiChen touched the other man’s elbow with a sad little smile.

“Don’t worry. This will get resolved.”

“Sect Leader Lan, how are you not worried?” Wei WuXian asked with a frown. Lan XiChen then turned to him and smiled.

“Young Master Wei, thank you for trying to defend these disciples, you did good. However, there are Sect politics you’re not aware of. I’m not completely without worries, but I know not everyone in the Jin Sect is as ferocious as you lot like to think.”

“Aren’t they?” Jin Ling asked with a belittling expression. Lan XiChen, surprisingly huffed at him.

“As long as you’re there to look out for yourselves, how can I be not reassured?” At this, Jin Ling made a long-suffering face. His relationship with Lan XiChen had always been strange – now it seemed they have developed a brotherly bond, where Lan XiChen understood Jin Ling’s personality better and Jin Ling looked at the Lan Sect Leader as an annoying older brother. It was amusing, though at the light of recent events, Lan SiZhui couldn’t really appreciate it.

“I hope you’re right.” Nie MingJue nodded and looked over at the three time-travelers as well. “And I hope the three of you are wrong, regarding the Jin Sect.”

“We don’t worry about useless things.” Jin Ling told him, not even looking at him, staring down one of the Jin disciples surrounding them. “You can be reassured, we’re not wrong.”

To this, Nie MingJue couldn’t answer without being suspicious, so he just pressed his lips together. In the following pause, Lan WangJi went over. Nie MingJue released Lan XiChen’s shoulder and clasped Lan WangJi in the shoulder as well as he nodded to Lan XiChen, then went back to his disciples.

“WangJi.” Lan XiChen turned to his brother, who bowed to him.

“Brother.” Lan XiChen took a deep breath, looking over the lot of them.

“WangJi, please wait with the disciples for our departure.”

“Brother?” Lan WangJi looked up, a confused look on his face. Lan XiChen shook his head in answer. Lan WangJi then bowed again and went over where Lan JingYi was waiting amongst the disciples.

“Wei WuXian!” Jiang Cheng’s voice sounded from the crowd and soon, Wei WuXian’s brother showed up next to them.

“Ah, Jiang Cheng!” Wei WuXian grinned at him.

“What were you thinking, fighting with a wound like that?!” Jiang Cheng demanded, stepping closer and beginning to tug on Wei WuXian’s clothes. Wei WuXian slapped his hands away with a yelp, stepping away.

“Jiang Cheng! What are you doing?!”

“Checking if your organs are still inside your body!”

“Ah, Jiang Cheng, were you worried about me?” He asked, his eyes wide and voice genuinely shocked, like he didn’t expect that.

“I just watched mother stab you the last time I saw you, idiot!” Jiang Cheng thundered. “Of course, I was worried!”

“And you’re not mad at me?” Wei WuXian blinked at him in wonder. Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes.

“I’m furious! But what can I do mother won’t do to you, once we’re back in Lotus Pier?!”

“Ah?!” Wei WuXian looked frightened suddenly, with reason, Lan SiZhui thought.

“Don’t worry, A-Xian.” Came Jiang FengMian’s voice suddenly as the Jiang Sect joined the gathered crowd there as well. Wei WuXian’s eyes widened even further, if possible. “I’ll personally overlook your punishment.” He said, pointedly glancing at Madam Yu at his side. She was standing with her chin held high, her hand cradling Zidian’s ring on her finger. She also had multiple wounds from the fight, but held herself straight and with pride.

“Just because of this, don’t expect your punishment to be light.” She said coldly. “Even Sect Leader Jiang wouldn’t be so bold as to argue with me on that.” She threw a look towards Jiang FengMian with that, who pressed his lips together and inclined his head.

“Sect Leader Jiang, Madam Yu.” Wei WuXian suddenly dropped onto his knees and bowed, his forehead touching the ground.

“What are you doing?!” Jiang Cheng cried out in fright, pulling him up. “Idiot!”

“A-Xian, you’ll have plenty of opportunity to apologize.” Jiang FengMian said, helping his son pull Wei WuXian up. “Not here, alright?”

“Sect Leader Jiang, I—”

“He just said not here. Are you deaf?” Jiang Cheng scoffed at him, shaking him by the arm. Wei WuXian frowned at him, then suddenly dropped himself into Jiang Cheng’s arms.

“Ah, Jiang Cheng, you’re so harsh with me! I’m injured, do you have to be so rough?!”

“Get off me!” Jiang Cheng protested, though he didn’t try to shake off Wei WuXian. “You truly have no shame, do you?!”

Wei WuXian then stood properly, smiling at Jiang Cheng wider than Lan SiZhui ever seen him, warm and fond. He reached out and fixed Jiang Cheng’s robes where he himself messed them up.

“I would never embarrass you, Jiang Cheng.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Jiang Cheng frowned at him, slapping his hand away. “Do you have a fever? Have you finally completely lost it?”

“I’m just trying to tell you I appreciate you, A-Cheng!”

“Who’s A-Cheng?!” Jiang Cheng looked at him horrified, stepping away. “Don’t call me that!” Wei WuXian laughed, holding his stomach. Jiang Cheng glared at him, but eventually settled as well.

Next came over Jin ZiXuan, followed by six Jin Sect disciples. Jin Ling tensed, taking a step back. Jin ZiXuan didn’t say anything, just raised his eyebrows.

“What?” Jin Ling scoffed at him. Jin ZiXuan didn’t answer, turning to Lan SiZhui instead.

“ChunYu-Jun.” He greeted, seemingly nonchalantly. Lan SiZhui looked at him silently. In the past, their interactions were pleasant and he didn’t dislike the Jin Sect heir, however, in this situation, he also didn’t know how to handle him. Then Jin ZiXuan surprised him by bowing. “My condolences.”

“For what?” Jin Ling asked with a frown. Jin ZiXuan threw him a look.

“Lady Wen was my guest for a short while during the Sunshot Campaign. I’m sad she had to meet her end like this.” Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes, not wanting to acknowledge this. There was an awkward pause, then Jin ZiXuan turned to Jin Ling. “Why do you still have your bow?”

“Why do you still have your sword?” Jin Ling asked back challengingly.

“I’m not a prisoner.”

“Oh, so now I’m a prisoner?!” Jin Ling snapped, annoyed.



“Of course, you are. Were you not paying attention to anything that had been said up until now?” Jin ZiXuan’s temperament was the usual calm nonchalance he projected to the world.

“Well, I’m not handing over my bow!”

“Mn.” Jin ZiXuan hummed, then gestured to one of his disciples, who stepped forward. Before he could even approach Jin Ling, the other pulled an arrow from his quiver and aimed at the disciple with a warning look.

“Don’t think I’m not going to shoot!”

“Stop being difficult.” Jin ZiXuan rolled his eyes. “You knew they won’t let you keep your spiritual weapon on you.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan XiChen spoke softly. Jin Ling looked over, his eyes wide with anger. In the end, he must’ve seen something on Lan XiChen’s face, because he began marching forward. Jin disciples stood in his way and he halted.

“Do you want me to hand off my weapon or not?!” He asked heatedly. “I’m not giving it to anyone else but Jin ZiXuan.” He said sternly. At this, Jin ZiXuan sighed but gestured to his disciples to step aside and let Jin Ling hand the bow over. As soon as the exchange happened, the Jin disciples surrounded Jin Ling again and guided him back next to Lan SiZhui, where he stopped with his arms crossed over his chest.

It didn’t take long for Jin GuangShan to reach them. Once he did, he looked over the grave faces of the prisoners, and said:

“This is not easy on any of you. Your actions now have the consequences.” Then, Jin GuangShan pointedly looked out onto the battlefield, where those disciples not currently occupied with other things were helping the injured and collecting the dead. Lan SiZhui’s breath hitched as he watched some Jin disciples picking up a slight figure in grey robes and he ducked his head, staring into his lap where his robes were still stained with Wen Qing’s blood.

“Sect Leader Jin.” Lan XiChen greeted somewhat coldly. Jin GuangShan looked over and nodded to him.

“ZeWu-Jun, I hope this little dispute will not cause tension between our Sects.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen answered, neither confirming, nor denying.

“Since we all have our Sects to take care of, how about everyone heading off?” He asked, looking around the gathered Sect Leaders. “This was a long day and a difficult battle. A lot of bonds have been tried here today between us. Let us go home and rewind.”

“Wait!” Lan JingYi called out, then surprised, tapped his lips, finding the silencing spell lifted. He stepped closer, the Lan disciples letting him through. “I’m going to Koi Tower as well.” He said sternly. Jin GuangShan turned to him with his eyebrows raised.

“JingYi?” Lan XiChen asked, his brows furrowed. Lan JingYi quickly turned to him, bowing deeply.

“Sect Leader Lan, please allow me to receive my punishment in Koi Tower along with Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling.”

“You’re to be punished and you’re even making demands?” Jin GuangShan frowned. “The three of you truly think you’re above the laws, don’t you?” He turned to Lan XiChen. “Don’t worry, ZeWu-Jun, naturally, your disciple is yours to punish as you see fit. The Jin Sect would never be so bold.”

“Does it really matter where I receive my punishment?” Lan JingYi turned to him, then back to Lan XiChen again. “ZeWu-Jun, I’ll submit to anything you rule out, but please, let me go with them.”

Lan XiChen looked at Lan JingYi with an uncharacteristic frown. This brought him into a difficult situation again. He clearly didn’t want the three of them separated again, but it would be beyond strange to allow this to Lan JingYi, especially since Sect Leader Jin also declined. In the end, Lan XiChen pressed his lips together.

“JingYi, join your disciple mates.” He ordered gently but sternly. Lan JingYi looked at him betrayed.

“But Sect Leader Lan—”

“JingYi.” Lan XiChen repeated, stronger this time.

“Then... then... I’ll also leave the Sect!” Lan JingYi said passionately. After a moment, he stepped back and bowed deeply. “Sect Leader Lan, I, Lan Cheng, Lan JingYi, would like to withdraw and leave the Lan Sect. Please grant permission.”

“Permission denied.” Lan XiChen told him coldly. Lan JingYi looked up with a hurt expression. “Join your disciple mates.”

For a moment, it looked like Lan JingYi was going to protest. He looked over at Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling pleadingly, but Lan SiZhui turned his gaze away. He didn’t see what Jin Ling did. After a long, silent moment, Lan JingYi straightened up and haltingly went over to the group of Lan Sect disciples.

“It’s for the better.” They heard one of the Lan disciples say quietly. “I’m sure Sect Leader Lan’s punishment won’t be as harsh as Sect Leader Jin’s.”

“Who cares how harsh it is?” Lan JingYi grumbled.

“Ah, JingYi,” Wei WuXian spoke up from the side and they all looked over at his bittersweet expression. He quickly schooled his features. “What character do you use for your birthname? I didn’t know your name was Lan Cheng! This all makes sense now.” He grinned, nudging Jiang Cheng’s elbow with his own, who scoffed at him at the jab. It was forced and they could all tell he was trying to lift spirits and defuse tension.

“Ah, since all matters have been cleared up, let us all go home.” Jin GuangShan repeated, diverting attention.

“Mn.” Jiang FengMian agreed. “Sect Leader Jin is right. We’ve all had a difficult time today. It is time to rest and reflect on this day.”

“The Nie Sect will take our leave then.” Nie MingJue said. “Sect Leader Jin, please expect our demands for the compensation soon.” He told the other Sect Leader, who nodded agreeing. Then, Nie MingJue bowed to the major Sect Leaders and left, his disciples falling into line neatly at his back.

“The Jiang Sect will also take our leave now.” Jiang FengMian said. He glanced at the two boys at his side. “Since we also have our own punishments to dole out, Sect Leader Jin, we trust you to judge fairly.” He said, then he bowed as well.

“Ah, guys!” Wei WuXian spoke up suddenly. Jiang FengMian halted in his move to walk off. “Hold on, alright?”

“Huh?” Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui shared a confused look at Wei WuXian’s pointed one. He just pressed his lips together in a bittersweet smile.

“Don’t worry. We will figure this out.”

“You’re so weird.” Jiang Cheng mumbled, gently nudging him. “Let’s go home before you bleed out.”

“I’m not going to bleed out! Big sister Qing took good care of me.” Wei WuXian pouted, turning to head after Jiang FengMian. Before he took two steps, he suddenly turned back. “Ah, Lan Zhan! I’ll see you soon, alright?!”

“Mn.” Lan WangJi nodded. Wei WuXian grinned at him.

“Lan Zhan, did you know? You’re even more fun to tease now!”

“What’s wrong with you?!” Jiang Cheng hissed, grabbing him by the arm, tugging him away, while Wei WuXian laughed and waved to them even as he was towed away. “You’re already about to receive harsh punishment, don’t you know when to stop?!”

Lan XiChen threw a confused look towards his brother but didn’t comment. Jin GuangShan was impatient to get going however, because then he said:

“We will be heading out then as well.”

Lan XiChen turned to Jin GuangShan. There was none of the usual gentle serenity in his voice or expression present as he said: “Mn. Please, expect my visit soon, Sect Leader Jin.”

“Your visit, ZeWu-Jun?” Jin GuangShan raised surprised eyebrows.

“After all, you’ve agreed I can make my own demands on Lan SiZhui’s punishment.” Lan XiChen clarified.

“Naturally.” Jin GuangShan frowned. “However, doesn’t Sect Leader Lan also have his own punishments to dole out? Surely, there’s no need to come personally.”

“The elders can overlook WangJi and JingYi’s punishment.” He left the rest unsaid. Was this any other Sect or Clan Leader whose former disciple was about to be punished, the implications would be clear: this was a personal matter he wanted to attend to personally. Jin GuangShan seemed to have this thought run through his head as well, because he grimaced before smiling awkwardly.

“We will anticipate ZeWu-Jun’s arrival then.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded. Jin GuangShan bowed shallowly, then gestured his men to follow him. One of them forced Lan SiZhui onto his feet. Before they departed properly, Lan XiChen called out suddenly. “Young Master Jin, may I have a word?”

Jin GuangShan and Jin ZiXuan looked back with different expressions; Jin ZiXuan’s was curious and slightly baffled, while Jin GuangShan looked suspicious and disapproving. However, he still gestured his son, who nodded and went over. Lan XiChen smiled at him stiffly and led him away a few steps, to speak in private. They exchanged a few words, Jin ZiXuan looking troubled. Then he bowed to Lan XiChen, who quickly stopped him and told him something. Jin ZiXuan huffed, then nodded and left, returning to his father’s side.

“Is everything alright?” Jin GuangShan asked discreetly once they bid goodbyes. Jin ZiXuan hummed but didn’t answer, glancing back at Jin Ling. Jin GuangShan looked at his son with a sharp look, but didn’t pry. “Let’s go then.” He said, and the Jin Sect, along with Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling began their journey towards Koi Tower. Lan SiZhui looked back one last time from the gates, catching a glimpse of Lan JingYi, who was looking towards them as well, a worried and dark look on his face. A moment later Lan XiChen must’ve called out to him, because he turned towards the Sect Leader with an even darker look. Then, the gates blocked Lan SiZhui’s sight from his brother.

# Anguish I.

## Chapter Summary

*In this place, Lan SiZhui truly suffered.*

**Content warning for ‘Anguish’ I-III :** Please note that this fic was rated mature for violence. It’s not *that* graphic, but be aware there are some torture/torture aftermath implications/elements in ‘Anguish’ I-III.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“SiZhui!” Someone shook his shoulder and Lan SiZhui startled awake, sitting up and reaching for Hudie, only to find his qiankun pouch missing. The Jin took it off him when they began their journey to Lanling, as well as Jin Ling’s sword. Hudie wouldn’t be inside anyways, Lan JingYi having taken it from him on the battlefield. He looked over at Jin Ling, who was the one shaking him awake, now looking at him with a frown. They just stopped for the night in the forest. Since Lanling was quite far, and Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui couldn’t travel by sword, even if they could, wouldn’t be allowed, it took them a couple of days to get there even by swords. Jin GuangShan went ahead, leaving the prisoners with eight disciples with Jin ZiXuan.

Jin Ling was leaning against a tree, his hands resting on his knees, the chains they secured them with dangling in the air. Lan SiZhui was formally leaning against the same tree, trying to meditate, but he must’ve fallen asleep, because now he woke lying on the ground.

“What were you dreaming of?” Jin Ling asked, as he looked back at the sight in front of them; the Jin disciples sharing a meal over a campfire. “You seemed distressed.”

“The Burial Mounds I think.” Lan SiZhui answered quietly, not sure himself. He didn’t remember what was he dreaming of specifically, but upon waking, he had the feeling of urgency to protect himself from something, some kind of resentment. Since he only woke like this before, when he just returned from the Burial Mounds after Wen Chao threw him inside, he had the feeling this was what he was dreaming about.

“Huh.” Jin Ling hummed, noting this but not inviting him for conversation. His earlier comment about Lan SiZhui’s distress in his sleep seemed unintentional, so he must be still mad and didn’t want to converse. Lan SiZhui remembered those early days when they weren’t friends yet, how Jin Ling would shut down and refuse to talk about anything, so this didn’t surprise him. It still hurt, but he deserved it after... “What?” Upon feeling his gaze on himself, Jin Ling asked, not even looking at him. Lan SiZhui lowered his gaze to the ground beneath them.

“It’s nothing.” Lan SiZhui said, then in hope of a conversation, feeling unsettled suddenly, he said: “I was just thinking about the first time we met.”

“Ah.” Jin Ling grunted, seemingly continuing to ignore him. After a long moment though, he huffed, and said: “I don’t even remember when we first met.” He grumbled, with a tone of someone being angry they were forced to speak to them. However, Jin Ling wasn’t the kind to talk if he didn’t want to, so Lan SiZhui suspected his friend didn’t feel as comfortable here as he pretended either. Lan SiZhui adjusted his pose, sitting comfortably.

“It was during the GusuLan guest lectures.” Lan SiZhui reminded him. “You were fourteen. Your uncle Jin sent you.”

“Ah, yes.” Jin Ling frowned, displeased. “Uncle was very insistent on it, since ZeWu-Jun personally invited me. Through my uncle, of course. They were talking and ZeWu-Jun suggested I should go.” He rolled his eyes. “Naturally, I had no choice. Even uncle Jiang didn’t seem to care much if I went or not.” He paused, scratching his neck. “I don’t remember that we met there though. I was mostly in the guest rooms, since I was too young to sit in class.”

“Hm.” Lan SiZhui hummed sadly. He remembered fondly of those times, though Jin Ling’s presence was not the reason these memories were important to him. Still, he remembered Jin Ling from back then, not that much different than about a year later when they met again in Dafan. “It was one of the first days of the lectures, most disciples just arrived. We were in the bamboo forest.”

“I was in the bamboo forest?” Jin Ling scoffed. “Why?”

Lan SiZhui shrugged. Then, tentatively, he began telling his side of the story:

Lan SiZhui was making his rounds in the bamboo forests, making sure the disciples taking a look around knew this place was for quiet meditation or intimate conversation. ZeWu-Jun entrusted him and Lan JingYi to keep the guest disciples, who arrived for the GusuLan guest lectures just the day before, in line. They divided the tasks between each other, Lan JingYi taking on the role to guide the disciples around, while Lan SiZhui made sure everyone behaved as they should, before they learned the rules. After all, in the Cloud Recesses, not knowing about the rules did not excuse the behavior.

This was when he noticed a group of purple-clad disciplines walking in a comfortable pace, looking around, but engaging in conversation deeply. One of them was telling the others something – he was the head disciple of the Jiang Sect, Jiang ShuGuang. He headed towards the group to warn them against gossip and loud conversation. He was just short of arriving when another group broke onto the path they were walking. They were Jin disciples, judging by their golden robes.

One of the Jin disciples hurried forth, glaring at the Jiang disciples, the others close on his heels. This person, Lan SiZhui have heard of. He was the youngest disciple to attend the lectures this time, the Jin Sect heir, who was only fourteen. It was said he had a quick temper;

however, nothing could prepare Lan SiZhui to the sheer volume and velocity the boy spoke with next.

“What did you just say, ShuGuang?!” He demanded, stopping three steps away from the Jiang disciples. They turned to look at him.

“A-Ling, didn’t you hear me just now?” Jiang ShuGuang asked, frowning.

“I heard you!” Junior Young Master Jin said. “And I dare you to say such lies again!”

“How can it be a lie?” Jiang ShuGuang asked. “I heard it from one of the servants, who was around before the Sunshot Campaign as well.”

“You heard it from a servant, and you believe it?! Just how stupid are you? Then you go around and spread such lies?!”

“I told you, it’s not lies!”

“It is!” Junior Young Master Jin insisted. “Take it back now!”

“Why should I? We’re not in Lotus Pier now. What can you do, A-Ling?”

“I’ll... I’ll break your legs!” Junior Young Master Jin threatened, and also attempted to draw his sword. However, at this, Lan SiZhui hurried forward, and the Jin Sect disciples also hurried forward, taking hold of the Jin Sect heir.

“Junior Young Master Jin, please, keep your temper. Fighting without permission is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses.” Lan SiZhui said, bowing to Junior Young Master Jin. He barely even glanced his way.

“Get out of my way!” Junior Young Master Jin sneered; his face distorted by the emotion. “I’ll have him whipped for spreading such lies!”

“I can’t let you do that.” Lan SiZhui told him, bowing his head in apology. Though Junior Young Master Jin was not in the right to have anyone whipped, so the apology was more for enforcing the rules than anything else. However, before anyone could answer, two more people joined. As Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw ZeWu-Jun, and by his side... Hanguang-Jun! But he didn’t even know his adoptive father and teacher was coming back to the lectures!

Lan SiZhui was quick to bow, not only because of Hanguang-Jun, but the Sect Leader was also here. Surely, they disturbed the brothers as ZeWu-Jun greeted Hanguang-Jun after the latter just arrived. A nice walk in the bamboo forest would’ve provided a good time away from the disciples to have an intimate conversation before it was revealed Hanguang-Jun returned.

After a moment of hesitation, the others also bowed, though the Jin Sect’s disciples were more shallow, less respectful.

“ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun.” Lan SiZhui started politely. “We apologize for the disturbance.”

“SiZhui, when we heard shouting just now, we came to see if everyone was alright. What happened?” ZeWu-Jun asked, looking to Lan SiZhui to explain the situation.

“ZeWu-Jun, I apologize.” Lan SiZhui said, feeling ashamed. He didn’t even know exactly what the issue was, other than an overheard conversation. Hanguang-Jun’s presence also flustered him a little. Even though he grew up with Hanguang-Jun, there was a distance and respect in their relationship more suited for a teacher and his disciple. However, Lan SiZhui couldn’t help the joy and hurt at Hanguang-Jun’s unexpected return. “All I know is this: Junior Young Master Jin overheard these disciples talking about...” Lan SiZhui trailed off, realizing he didn’t even know what the topic of the conversation was.

“They said my mother and my father broke off their engagement when they attended the lectures here.” Junior Young Master Jin said with a glare towards the disciples. After a moment, unexpectedly, even to his own brother’s surprise, Hanguang-Jun spoke.

“And?” His tone was as cold as his expression, though he was not looking at anyone, but down at the path at their feet.

“They’re lying!” Junior Young Master Jin said after a shocked pause, not feeling any shame about his emotional state in front of the Two Jades of Lan.

“Incorrect.” Hanguang-Jun said, in the same tone and the same expression. ZeWu-Jun turned slightly towards him, but Lan SiZhui saw some amusement as well as resignation in his expression. ZeWu-Jun would not step in while Hanguang-Jun handled the situation. This was typical to their dynamic.

“What?!” Junior Young Master Jin snapped, outraged, whipping his head around to look at Hanguang-Jun with wide, furious eyes. However, in the face of his fury, Hanguang-Jun remained stone-faced and detached. It was only because Lan SiZhui grew up with him that he could see behind the expression, into the slight raising of his chin, the relaxation of his brows. Hanguang-Jun believed he expressed what he wanted, that with this, the situation should be over.

“Junior Young Master Jin.” Lan SiZhui bowed towards him respectfully, knowing that since Hanguang-Jun decided the topic was closed, he would not say more. However, other people often needed further explanation, so he said: “Hanguang-Jun had attended the same lectures your father and mother did. I believe that he’s witnessed the act and is telling the truth.”

“You—He—” Junior Young Master Jin appeared to be furious and speechless, and after a moment of huffing and puffing, he turned to the seniors, bowed without respect and stormed away, taking his group with him. Hanguang-Jun looked towards the YunmengJiang disciples, who seemed to realize just now, that they were standing around for nothing. Before they could leave after bowing, ZeWu-Jun turned his head towards them as well, calling out softly:

“Gossiping is prohibited in the Cloud Recesses. Please, keep yourself to the rules during your stay here.” The boys looked at each other, bowed again with a ‘yes’, then rushed off before they could receive punishment.



There was a long moment, while Lan SiZhui wasn't sure what he should say, if he should speak at all. However, seeing ZeWu-Jun's expression, he relaxed a little. Since Hanguang-Jun left a few months ago, ZeWu-Jun became more and more tense. Lan SiZhui understood it, for every month that passed, he was also more and more anxious for Hanguang-Jun to return. Him and ZeWu-Jun met often these days, and as much as ZeWu-Jun's duties allowed, they also often relaxed together as well, conversing beside a cup of tea in the Hanshi or enjoying a cake in Gusu.

Since ZeWu-Jun looked much more relaxed now than he had before, Lan SiZhui also felt braver. Even though after he'd returned, conversations with Hanguang-Jun tended to be cold, distant and stilted, he didn't let this stop him from approaching the other.

"Hanguang-Jun, is it true that the lady Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan broke off their engagement?" Lan SiZhui asked shyly. Hanguang-Jun didn't look angry at the question, but he also didn't look like he was going to answer. ZeWu-Jun must've seen the same thing on his brother, because he answered in his stead.

"Yes." He said. "It is true that Sect Leader Jiang and Sect Leader Jin broke off the arranged engagement to reinforce peace between their Sects as there was tension between their children." He said, and his tone was similar to the Grandmaster's when he held lecture. Lan SiZhui figured as Sect Leader, ZeWu-Jun shouldn't engage in gossip, but presenting this as a lecture about the past, he could get away with it. Lan SiZhui repressed a smile at this, used to this trick from both brothers.

"Did they not love each other?" Lan SiZhui asked, getting brave upon receiving an answer. ZeWu-Jun's lips parted, and his eyes lowered as he was clearly looking for words. Lan SiZhui was about to apologize, he didn't mean to be nosy. However, before he could, ZeWu-Jun answered:

"It is always hard to accept something one is being forced into. The Sects believed free will was more important than an old promise."

Lan SiZhui nodded, understanding this. However, after a moment, he remembered, and asked: "But they still married afterwards." A sad smile crossed ZeWu-Jun's face as he momentarily turned in Hanguang-Jun's direction, but then he lowered his eyes again, looking over at Lan SiZhui as he said:

"Love is complicated." He settled on. From his final tone, Lan SiZhui could tell he was done with the topic. "You did the right thing, stopping Junior Young Master Jin from breaking the rules. Thank you for looking after our guests, SiZhui."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui bowed. "ZeWu-Jun asked, so naturally, me and Lan JingYi will do our best."

"I have no doubt." ZeWu-Jun smiled at him with amusement, probably thinking how Lan JingYi, who himself was notorious for dancing on the edge of breaking the rules at all times, was going to enforce the law. Lan SiZhui glanced at Hanguang-Jun, but seeing him looking on the path still, he realized he was imposing now. He took a step back and bowed again.

“ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun, I’ll take my leave now.” He said, then turned to go. Before he fully turned around though, Hanguang-Jun spoke.

“Lan SiZhui, stay.” Lan SiZhui froze, then turned back, lips parted, his eyes wide. Before his enthusiasm got too obnoxious though, he lowered his gaze, fighting the smile threatening to break out on his face. It wasn’t that Hanguang-Jun didn’t spend time with him, or that they didn’t enjoy each other’s company. It was just, usually, whenever Hanguang-Jun returned from a long trip, he would converse with his brother and uncle first, then he would visit Lan SiZhui. Since Lan SiZhui saw Sect Leader Lan only a few hours ago, he was confident his adoptive father did not have the chance to speak to his brother and uncle as they usually did.

Hanguang-Jun then turned to ZeWu-Jun. Before he said anything, ZeWu-Jun must’ve anticipated what he wanted to say, because he told him:

“At this point in time, it is too early to decide what is happening. I will further look into it.” He hesitated, glancing at Lan SiZhui before stepping closer to Hanguang-Jun, a hand raising to touch his elbow gently. “WangJi, it’s been too long.” He paused, glancing at Lan SiZhui again, then saying: “Be patient. Whatever this phenomenon is, it can wait a few days. The guest lectures are upon us.”

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun said. He looked at his brother, and softly said: “Thank you.”

“No need, WangJi.” ZeWu-Jun smiled at him warmly. “SiZhui.” He nodded to Lan SiZhui in greeting, who bowed as ZeWu-Jun parted from them, heading towards the main buildings. For a long moment, Hanguang-Jun didn’t speak nor move, seemingly lost in thought. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to do, so he just waited. In the end, Hanguang-Jun took a deep breath, turning to Lan SiZhui. He didn’t meet his eyes.

“SiZhui.” He paused, seemingly not sure how to continue.

“Hanguang-Jun.” Lan SiZhui bowed respectfully, his tone soft. “You’ve returned.” This was an acknowledgement of a fact. He didn’t say he didn’t know Hanguang-Jun would be back now, for it felt like a reprimand. He didn’t say he was glad his adoptive father was back, that felt like he was trying to imply Hanguang-Jun being gone was wrong. While Lan SiZhui didn’t understand why the other traveled so much, he grew up with this, so this was normal for him. Hanguang-Jun seemed to appreciate the lack of implications.

“How are your studies coming along?” He asked with a tilt of his head.

“Sect Leader Lan says I’m doing good.” Lan SiZhui said. Although he could say more, could tell Hanguang-Jun that Grandmaster Lan invited him for tea a few weeks ago, and they spoke about his studies briefly; Grandmaster praised him for his knowledge. He didn’t say ZeWu-Jun invited him over when he had the chance to speak to him after he returned from night-hunts with his classmates and praise him for doing good work. Hanguang-Jun seemed to catch this modesty but said nothing about it.

“Good.” He approved softly. There was a pause, then Hanguang-Jun asked: “Walk with me?” To this, Lan SiZhui smiled and nodded, glad to have been invited. They walked for a while, slowly approaching the buildings. As they did, his back was lightly touched by Bichen’s

pommel, an overly familiar gesture from Lan SiZhui's childhood, with an equally familiar, soft reprimand: "Posture."

Lan SiZhui immediately fixed his posture, earning an approving glance from Hanguang-Jun. After a few minutes, Lan SiZhui couldn't help his curiosity. He never knew the reasons for the trips his adoptive father made, and ZeWu-Jun also never said. However, just now he was privy to something he never had been before; catching the brothers talking about some news Hanguang-Jun must've taken back. He decided to be brave.

"Hanguang-Jun, may I ask you a question?"

"Mn."

"You leave Cloud Recesses every few months for sometimes a few weeks, sometimes a few months." He hesitated, then, since he began, he committed to this. "Do you—" He cut himself off, rethinking his question. "Are you running errands for ZeWu-Jun?"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui quieted, not knowing what to do with that answer. If this was the case, no wonder Lan SiZhui didn't know anything about this. After a moment, Hanguang-Jun spoke again, this time asking a question himself: "SiZhui. Do you know what our Sect's motto, 'righteousness' means?"

"Uh..." Lan SiZhui hesitated, considering his answer. He wondered if Hanguang-Jun was looking for the obvious answer, just testing if Lan SiZhui really was a good student. It was also possible, since this was something Hanguang-Jun often did; he would ask specific questions, looking to see if Lan SiZhui understood the point he was trying to make. If he didn't, Hanguang-Jun would help him, guide him to the answer. Should he assume and answer, or risk sounding clueless and ask? After thinking this through, all the while Hanguang-Jun waited him out, he stopped and bowed to Hanguang-Jun. "Please, Hanguang-Jun, give me your wisdom!" Hanguang-Jun nodded to him and continued walking. Lan SiZhui followed.

"*'Do not take advantage of your position to oppress others. Do not make assumptions about others. Morality is the priority. Maintain your own discipline. Love all beings. Honor good people. Uphold the value of justice. Shoulder the weight of morality. Earn trust. Believe sincerely. Be just. Be generous. Be ethical. Be grateful. Be loyal. Reject the crooked path.'*" He took a pause. "Do you know why I chose these rules to recite?"

Lan SiZhui hesitated for a moment, then said what first came to his mind. "Because they describe the meaning of being righteous." Hanguang-Jun nodded.

"What does justice mean to you, SiZhui?"

"Mm. Those who are evil must be punished, and those who are good must get their reward." Lan SiZhui said slowly, choosing his words carefully, while also reciting something he learned.

"How do you decide who deserves punishment and who deserves reward?" Lan SiZhui almost frowned at this, trying to think this through.

“Those who do evil should be punished. Who do good should be rewarded.” That wasn’t an answer. “How do you decide who is evil and who isn’t?” He asked, looking up at Hanguang-Jun for guidance like he had so many times when he was much younger.

“Mn. I listed a specific selection of the rules. Do you know why?” Lan SiZhui thought for a long time, but in the end, he defeatedly shook his head. “Pay really close attention and think about your answer. *‘Believe sincerely. Be loyal and filial. Maintain your own discipline.’*”

“They all reflect back to one’s own morality?” Lan SiZhui guessed. Hanguang-Jun nodded.

“And?”

“And...” While Lan SiZhui thought, they started their second round around the main lecture hall. Hanguang-Jun nodded to those they met on the way and bowed to them, but otherwise didn’t pay attention to others. Since the greetings and bows were more addressed towards Hanguang-Jun, Lan SiZhui ignored them as well.

“*‘Appreciate the good people. Morality is the priority. Reject the crooked path.’*”

“Hanguang-Jun.” Lan SiZhui looked up in realization. “Are you referring to that... You didn’t list only one negative principle?”

“Mn. Why?”

“It must mean... It must mean Hanguang-Jun believes that righteousness should be practiced with positivity, not negativity.” At his nod, Lan SiZhui felt proud. He bowed. “Thank you for your wisdom, Hanguang-Jun!”

“Do not rush with the praise.” He scolded gently. “We’re not done. You haven’t learned an important lesson yet.” Lan SiZhui thought back on their conversation, realization dawning on him.

“Right. My answer.”

“Mn.”

“So, if one must practice righteousness with positivity, and one must not make assumptions or be quick to judge... Then that means my answer is wrong.” He didn’t look up the whole time he thought out loud. Now he did. “Can we... We can’t decide what is evil what is not. Can we?” He asked, brows furrowed. He thought for another second. “I cannot judge if a person is truly evil, because I do not know what is in their hearts. I cannot stand against evil if I’m not certain about what evil is. But then... Hanguang-Jun, how am I to know what is just?”

“If one cannot tell what is just and what isn’t, how does one take a stance?” Hanguang-Jun asked.

“One doesn’t?” Lan SiZhui frowned, fidgeting with his hands, looking down with a frown and shook his head. The answer didn’t feel right. “One shouldn’t stand by and watch others suffer. Those who are innocent should be protected.”

After a moment, Hanguang-Jun said: “SiZhui. This is only true if you fully believe it in your heart. It is fine if you do not, but you mustn’t lie, not to me and not to yourself.” He said seriously, with weight in his words.

“I believe I do.” SiZhui said, looking down again. “No. I know I do.” He said with slight defiance, looking up. “By protecting the innocent, I also go against those who wish to do harm. And that, I believe, is righteous.” Lan SiZhui beamed at him proudly and Hanguang-Jun let him bask in it for a moment before he nodded, urging Lan SiZhui to calm down.

“So, how should one serve justice?” Hanguang-Jun asked, carrying on the conversation. Or maybe it was a lecture at this point, Lan SiZhui couldn’t decide. There were a few minutes, while Lan SiZhui thought. In the end, he gave up and frowned, disappointed that he didn’t figure out the answer by himself.

“I don’t know, Hanguang-Jun.”

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun hummed calmly, reassuring Lan SiZhui he wasn’t disappointed. He said: “Having doubts is natural, good even. It shows you have good morals. You have a lifetime to decide where you draw the line. Until then, you must listen to what is in your heart. As long as you keep yourself to your own disciplines and uphold your own morals, you stay true to yourself. However, in a situation where you must make such decision, remember this: if you hesitate too much, you might end up with an undesired outcome. Whether you’re right, you should bear the consequences of your actions.”

Lan SiZhui looked at him searchingly for a long time. This sounded like something Hanguang-Jun personally learned, not through the principles, but through a tough life. Lan SiZhui knew that the war was harsh on his adoptive father’s generation, even though people barely mentioned anything about those times in the Cloud Recesses, or even in the surrounding area. Since this was an important lesson his adoptive father thought necessary to teach him, Lan SiZhui showed his gratitude, bowing deeply.

“Hanguang-Jun, I’ll remember this lesson. Thank you for teaching me.”

As he straightened, he noticed Hanguang-Jun not looking at him, but at something to the side. Looking over, Lan SiZhui saw ZeWu-Jun in the doorway to the Lanshi, Grandmaster behind him at the podium, looking over some notebooks, which must’ve been the material for the visiting Sects. ZeWu-Jun was watching them with a curious expression. Lan SiZhui bowed to him briefly, and the Sect Leader gave them a small wave before Grandmaster said something behind him that took away his attention. Lan SiZhui turned back to Hanguang-Jun, who nodded to him, then began walking again. Lan SiZhui quickly fell in step beside him. Even though he paid attention to walk with a straight back and with his hands behind his back, Bichen’s pommel still touched him gently.

“Posture.” Hanguang-Jun said softly. This was more of a reminder to not show how happy he was to take a walk with his adoptive father, but at this, Lan SiZhui only had an even harder time holding back his smile.

Not long after the lectures concluded Hanguang-Jun actually agreed to supervise his junior group on night-hunts for the first time since Lan SiZhui turned sixteen. Not long after that, they got the report about Mo manor and their lives changed forever. That was the first time Lan SiZhui met Jin Ling since that first day of the lectures.

Lan SiZhui told most of this to Jin Ling, though he left out some more personal details. He decided to share the details of his conversation with Hanguang-Jun, because since then, he also barely thought about that conversation and while he remembered, it was good to share this with Jin Ling as well.

“SiZhui, we’re about to go, receive punishment. Are you sure you want to ask philosophical questions now?” Jin Ling looked at him skeptically when he finished. Lan SiZhui shrugged, just relieved not to have to sit in uncomfortable silence the whole night. Jin Ling huffed in the end, saying: “Hanguang-Jun was so rude once he showed up. He didn’t say but two words, yet it was so cold.”

“He just returned from an eight-month long travel.” Lan SiZhui told him as an explanation. “It is well-known Hanguang-Jun is not a man of many words, and not having interacted with people he knew well, I’m sure during his travels he spoke even less. It is not surprising he needed some time to adjust.”

“He was away for eight months?” Jin Ling slightly turned to him, though he was still not looking at Lan SiZhui. He nodded.

“He always traveled a lot, a lot of times for months. He would also stay for months or years, but then he would leave again.” Lan SiZhui told him. “I was surprised back then that he stayed for the lectures that he even taught some classes.”

“He taught classes during the lectures?” Jin Ling frowned. “Good thing then, I was too young to attend them.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed nonjudgmentally. When Jin Ling didn’t say anything else, he found a twig on the ground and began fidgeting with it. “I forgot about this conversation since then, didn’t even think about it until now.” He said quietly. “I wonder, even if I forgot it, was this what Hanguang-Jun meant back then?”

Jin Ling didn’t answer, not looking at him either. Returning to the silence, Lan SiZhui figured this was a topic Jin Ling didn’t wish to discuss. He didn’t want to push his luck even more, so he just sighed, turning away a little, saying:

“Forget it.”

“Forget it is right.” Jin Ling said suddenly passionately. Lan SiZhui looked over with furrowed brows. He wanted to avoid upsetting Jin Ling with further conversation, but this might’ve been the wrong thing to say. “We’re here now. There’s no point questioning it.”

Lan SiZhui was questioning whether they were talking about the same thing. He decided to take a guess where Jin Ling’s thoughts went, and began to say:

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t.” Jin Ling snapped. Lan SiZhui looked over, but Jin Ling was looking the other way, his jaw clenched tightly. So, they really were speaking of different things just now. While Lan SiZhui was pondering whether he was in the right or not, Jin Ling was still mad at him. “Just don’t apologize.”

“You deserve one though.” Lan SiZhui told him. While he meant most of the things he said, this was not the way to say them. As a Lan, Lan SiZhui should’ve been able to keep these negative feelings contained, not unload them onto Jin Ling in a form of a physical fight so angrily. Jin Ling scoffed.

“Lan SiZhui, I told you not to apologize, so don’t.” Jin Ling told him matter-of-factly. “There are things between us we don’t talk about. No need to bring them up now.”

“If we don’t address—”

“What, it will fester? Lan SiZhui, I now know just what festers in your heart.” He looked over sharply from the corner of his eyes. “There’s no need to address it now. Once we’re done with this whole thing and none of us are dead, we may talk about it. But this is nor the time, nor the place, not the mood for it.” He said. “If you apologize for that, I’ll have to apologize as well.” Jin Ling said with a distasteful expression. “Who wants to apologize? Forget it.”

“Sometimes ‘forget it’ just isn’t enough though.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“Well, don’t apologize now then. We still have a lot to do. Who knows how else will you offend me in the meantime? Just delay it until we’re done.” Jin Ling told him. Lan SiZhui caught it before, too, that Jin Ling mentioned ‘once we’re done with this whole thing’. What was he planning again?

“What do you mean?”

“SiZhui, did you already forget? We still haven’t figured out what my uncle wants.” Lan SiZhui looked at him for a long moment. He didn’t even think about Jin GuangYao lately, his thoughts so consumed by saving his family, he almost forgot. They originally went to the Qiongqi Path to figure out Jin GuangYao’s plan. Lan SiZhui was still too preoccupied by thoughts of his family, this seemed such an out of place thing, too. Somehow, it felt like since he made the decision to take the Wen away, this whole thing became extremely personal for him. He didn’t think about being from the future, didn’t think about Jin GuangYao’s plots. He just wanted to save the people important to him. Clearly, Jin Ling had completely different priorities, which was fine. It was just a little disorienting, having to think about this again.

“I...” He started, unsure how to finish. Initially, he wanted to say he didn’t forget, but it was not true. He did.

“It’s fine.” Jin Ling shook his head with a disgusted expression. “Whatever.”

“No.” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. “It isn’t whatever.” He took a deep breath and forced himself to say: “I didn’t think about it. I was selfish.”

“You were.” Jin Ling cut him off before he could say anything, though he clearly wanted to. “But that’s over now. Wen Qing is dead and the Wen will be left alone.”

“Don’t speak about it so casually.” Lan SiZhui glared at his profile, which made the other look at him with a frown of his own.

“SiZhui, she had been dead for over a decade.”

“As had your parents.” Lan SiZhui shot back, immediately feeling bad. However, Jin Ling nodded, as if satisfied.

“Yes. But we both wanted to save both, so let’s concentrate on this. We still want to save the cultivation world of the future, do we not?” Lan SiZhui wanted to tell him he didn’t particularly care, but Jin Ling was right. He was selfish and did everything in his power to save the Wen. Didn’t other people also deserve the same? He now knew Nie MingJue, whom they also encountered in the past in the form of a resentful sword spirit of his saber. He liked the harsh Sect Leader as much as their relationship allowed, and thought it was truly a shame he died in the future. Perhaps, if they stopped Jin GuangYao...

“Exactly.” Jin Ling said, and Lan SiZhui looked up, confused. Did he say the thoughts out loud? “I see it on your face.” Jin Ling told him. “You finally snapped out of it. Good.” He turned back to watch the Jin by the fire. “We will need your head in this.” Lan SiZhui wasn’t sure what ‘snapping out of it’ Jin Ling meant. However, even if they wanted to investigate...

“We’re going to Koi Tower to be punished. They won’t just let us snoop around.”

“No, they won’t.” Jin Ling chewed his lip. “And while I’m not looking forward to it, I also understand we need to take this punishment. If we don’t, they will never let us go.”

“You and JingYi should’ve never received punishment for this.” Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes, his thoughts returning to this topic. “Nor Wei WuXian, nor Lan WangJi.”

“How arrogant.” Jin Ling snorted.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui frowned at him. “I’m trying to—”

“To apologize again?” Jin Ling looked heavenward. “For what? I’ve made the decision to stand by you. Unlike what you and JingYi think, I’m not actually a stupid child. I could’ve stopped you at any point. How many opportunities did I have? Think for a moment.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui glared at him. “You know why you never stopped me.”

“What?” Jin Ling looked over. “Because you somehow forced our hands or something? Truly, SiZhui, you’re an arrogant idiot. You truly belong in this world. I’m Sect Leader. What is there I cannot do? If I don’t want to do something, I won’t do it. I can think for myself, you know. We’re not that close to feel obligated to help you. JingYi might be too clingy, so would Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi is clinging to Wei WuXian, so we know why he came, too. I



don't like the Wen. They are dogs who deserve to be put down. But I also have a brain and can tell right from wrong." He paused. "Actually, remember that question you never answered Hanguang-Jun? Here's your answer. You decide who's evil and who isn't very simply. Use your brain!"

"So, what am I? Evil or not?" Lan SiZhui frowned at him. Jin Ling glared at him for a long moment, then turned away.

"Has anyone told you you're overthinking things?"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together at this evasion of topic.

Jin Ling grumbled something under his breath Lan SiZhui couldn't make out, then cleared his throat theatrically. "I'm going to sleep." He announced a touch more loudly than necessary. He then turned his back to Lan SiZhui, leaning against the trunk of the tree. Lan SiZhui watched his even breaths for a moment, then sighed and positioned his legs into lotus position and began meditating.



"Young Master, we've arrived." One of the disciples traveling with them said. "Let me go ahead and inform Sect Leader Jin."

"Mn." Jin ZiXuan dismissed him with a slight head gesture and the disciple hurried off. They have just landed in Koi Tower after traveling for days to get there. The Jin Sect's home was as imposing as ever. The greeting hall was towering over where they stood just on the top of the stairs.

"Hey!" Jin Ling called out in the direction of his father, not addressing him directly. This made Lan SiZhui wonder if Jin Ling ever initiated a proper conversation with Jin ZiXuan that didn't start with 'hey'. Though, he imagined it would be hard to decide how to address him, as it had been for Lan SiZhui to address his adoptive fathers differently this time. Did Lan JingYi also have this same issue with his own parents this time? He also wondered; if Lan SiZhui learned the truth about the identity of his parents before their death, would he also have trouble addressing them? He lived so long without ever even thinking about his birth parents, while Jin Ling grew up hearing about them all the time. It might've been different for him.

The previous thought also reminded Lan SiZhui, and he began to wonder how Lan JingYi was faring. When they parted, Lan XiChen was quite harsh with him – not unreasonably so, but it still would've been awful for the other to experience. Was he taken back to Cloud Recesses and punished? What kind of punishment did Lan XiChen rule out for him? Was he to be whipped? Lan SiZhui hoped not. But this thought now nested itself into his head, and suddenly, he had the urge to rush back. However, he knew if he even tried, he would be immediately detained if not killed. He also had no spiritual power or any other means to fight.

"Where are they going to take us?" Jin Ling continued, and Lan SiZhui returned from his thoughts by the time Jin ZiXuan answered.

“Not my concern.”

“Huh?” Jin Ling scoffed at his father’s profile where he wasn’t looking at them. “How is it not?! Are you not also responsible?!” Jin ZiXuan at this slightly turned his head, looking at them from the corner of his eyes.

“Watch yourself.” Jin ZiXuan said, then turned forward again. Before Jin Ling could get angry at this response, someone else arrived. It was a man dressed in different robes than the others, also wearing armor. Also next to the man Jin GuangYao also arrived. They both bowed to Jin ZiXuan, though Jin GuangYao didn’t hold it long like the other man.

“Brother, you’ve returned.” He smiled at the other. “Welcome back.”

“Mn.” Jin ZiXuan inclined his head.

“ZiXuan, since father is busy, he sent the chief of guards to deal with the prisoners.” He said, gesturing to the man at his side. The other bowed deeply.

“Young Master Jin, chief Li XingXu is greeting you.” He said politely. Jin ZiXuan inclined his head again in greeting. He turned to his brother.

“A-Yao, since I’m the one in charge of them, I’ll take Jin Ling and ChunYu-Jun to receive their punishments.”

“Ah, ZiXuan, there’s actually no need.” Jin GuangYao told him. “Father actually requests your presence. Since we left, we left the wedding planners in charge as well. They are anxious to share.” At this, Jin ZiXuan pressed his lips together, looking over at the two prisoners. In the end, he sighed and nodded.

“Then I’ll leave them in the capable hands of chief Li XingXu.”

“Yes, Young Master.” Li XingXu bowed again. With one last look towards them, Jin ZiXuan and Jin GuangYao departed, heading towards the main buildings, Jin GuangYao bowing a little and letting his brother before himself.

Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a look, though Lan SiZhui didn’t know what passed between them. Then, Li XingXu stepped forward and gestured at something to the sides. Guards came and relieved the disciples who had been accompanying Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui.

“Brothers, thank you for your hard work.” Li XingXu told them and they bowed to him back before leaving. Once they also left, Li XingXu looked over them. “Let us go.” He said, then turned and led them towards the side, to go deeper into Koi Tower. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui obediently followed, though Jin Ling’s lips were pressed into a disapproving line.

“Where are you taking us?” He asked, once they passed a few buildings. The chief didn’t answer, continuing as if he didn’t even hear Jin Ling. They met some people on the way, mostly servants who were quick to get out of their way, some disciples as well, who looked upon them with displeased frowns, but also didn’t cause trouble.

As they got deeper into the buildings, the more agitated Jin Ling became, looking around with a fierce frown. Lan SiZhui tried to catch his gaze, throwing him a questioning look, once he had. Jin Ling's frown deepened and turned to Li XingXu.

"Are you taking us to the prisons?!" He snapped, angry. Li XingXu reacted to this with only a stutter in his step, but it was enough to get Jin Ling to continue. "The prisons are for those committing a serious crime!"

"Did ChunYu-Jun not commit a serious crime with you by his side?" Li XingXu asked, his tone mildly curious. He likely knew the answer, only asked because he wanted to know how Jin Ling would respond.

"The prisons are a vile place and nobody had been taken there in decades!" Jin Ling protested. At this, Li XingXu stopped, so they did as well. The chief turned to them.

"Sir, you must be mistaken. It was only three months ago two people were sent there." He paused. "And the prisons are not vile, only prisons. Their purpose is not to be comfortable."

"Bullshit!" Jin Ling argued. "I've lived here all my life and only been there once when my uncle showed me where it was."

"Then your memory must be faulty." Li XingXu said turning and continuing. They were also urged to keep walking.

"You still can't take us there!"

"Sir, you're prisoners. Where else were you expecting to be placed?"

"This is outrageous." Jin Ling glared at the man's back, but the other didn't answer. They kept walking and after a while, they reached a building seemingly isolated from the rest of the Koi Tower. There, the chief stopped, greeting the people standing guard outside. Not sooner than the guards bowed, another man showed up from inside.

"YiShen, this is the person you need to take." Li XingXu said after brief greetings, standing aside and gesturing to the guards by Jin Ling's side. They stepped forward, bringing Jin Ling with them. He grumbled unhappy.

"Yes, chief." The man said. Four guards hurried forward, replacing the ones by Jin Ling's side, whom returned to Lan SiZhui's. Jin Ling looked around.

"Hey, what is the meaning of this?" He asked, confused.

"Bring him." The man said, and the guards urged Jin Ling forward, but the other refused to move.

"Wait. What do you mean he will take me?" He asked, looking back. "What about SiZhui?"

"He will be placed as well, don't worry MouShi." Li XingXu said. Jin Ling glared at him and began to turn. Before he could, guards took hold of him, but he tried to break out from their hold.

“Hey! Release me!”

“Stop struggling and move along!” One of the guards barked at him.

“Where are you taking SiZhui?” Jin Ling insisted, not ceasing his struggles.

“Does it matter? You’ll receive your punishments separately. Don’t be difficult.” Li XingXu told him.

“You said we will be brought to the prisons. This is the only prison in Koi Tower, so where are you taking him?” Jin Ling asked.

“Why would I tell you?” Li XingXu shook his head as a tired parent. “Move along quietly and take your punishment. Sect Leader Jin is generous with you, so don’t struggle.”

“I don’t care about punishment.” Jin Ling glared. “Where are you taking SiZhui?”

“It is none of your business.” Li XingXu furrowed his brows. “Move along.” He gestured to the guards, who grabbed him.

“Hey!” Jin Ling protested. “Let go of me!” They didn’t and Jin Ling began to struggle in earnest. Looking at the angry expression of the chief, Lan SiZhui swallowed and spoke up.

“Jin Ling.”

“SiZhui, they can’t just take you wherever without a word!” Jin Ling insisted angrily. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“It will be fine.” He promised. “After we receive the punishment, we will meet again, alright?”

“It’s not, are you insane?!” Jin Ling snarled. Lan SiZhui glanced at the chief again. In fear of Jin Ling receiving even more severe punishment for this, he said:

“Jin Ling, it really is. Remember? I grew up in the Cloud Recesses. Punishment is usual for me.”

“But—” Jin Ling began, but Lan SiZhui cut him off.

“Can’t you just go quietly?” He was a little harsh on purpose, hoping the cold tone would make Jin Ling angry with him and say ‘whatever!’ before storming inside on his own. However, this didn’t work and the other glared back at him. Lan SiZhui sighed, frustrated that he was not able to manipulate Jin Ling into doing what he wanted as well as Lan JingYi could. “Just go, please.” He said in the end. There had to be something either in his tone or expression, because Jin Ling clenched his teeth together, not stopping his glare even as he was dragged inside. The guard who came to greet them bowed quickly, then followed them. The door closed behind Jin Ling, who held his gaze until the heavy doors cut their sights off. The movement also activated a silencing charm right away.

“This guy is truly...” Li XingXu began, then shook his head and gestured his men to bring Lan SiZhui along, beginning to walk further into the direction they had been heading. As they proceeded, less and less buildings framed them, replaced by smaller ponds and gardens before they came along another part of the Koi Tower. Lan SiZhui definitely never seen this place before. This building was similar to the one Jin Ling was brought into, so he must’ve been mistaken about Koi Tower only having one prison.

The door was open and Lan SiZhui was escorted inside, led by Li XingXu. At first glance, the building looked unsuspicious. There was a low table at the far wall, behind it a sliding door. The room was sparsely decorated, and it was clear this was an office of some kind. A man sat behind the low table, standing up and bowing once they got closer.

“Is everything prepared?” Li XingXu asked.

“Yes, chief.”

“Good.” The chief nodded and they went around the low table to the sliding doors. Pulling them away, it revealed a staircase down. They went down, two guards grabbing torches from the wall near the entrance.

The staircase was long, clearly leading deep under the Koi Tower. Damp, cold air surrounded them. Once they got down, Lan SiZhui saw prison cells lining the walls. They led him ahead, towards the end of the corridor. The doors to the cells were solid, not bars like he was led to believe – he had never been in a prison before, but he spoke to someone once who had. They described it as a dark and empty place, with nothing to do but ponder on your crimes. Bars were placed instead of doors containing the criminals, so the guards wouldn’t have to enter to see the prisoners, and also like this they could give them food without having to interact. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to make of this, but currently he had other things to worry about.

They arrived to the last cell, and one of the guards rushed forward, opening the door. It had a complicated lock that required multiple keys to open. Once it was opened, the chief guard motioned the others to lead Lan SiZhui inside.

The inside of the cell was, as previously described, dark and empty. There was some hay thrown into one corner to serve as a bed, and a bucket in another corner. However, once they entered, the guards didn’t leave him there as he was, as he thought they would. They rushed to the sides, where they hooked off some chains from the walls. Lan SiZhui watched with a confused expression as they were brought over. Two guards removed the cuffs from Lan SiZhui’s hands and took hold of his hands harshly, guiding it towards the chains the others held.

Lan SiZhui remained silent, watching as first one of his hands were secured, then the next, stretching his arms to the sides. They adjusted the chains to pull taut, then they hurried to chain up his ankles as well. Lan SiZhui watched on, silently impressed that these people thought him such a threat. The guards then stopped, bowing to the chief.

“I’ll personally overlook his punishment. Prepare the whip.” Li XingXu said. Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened – he knew the Sects were mad, knew Jin GuangShan was mad. However, this was the moment he has just realized what exactly awaited him. He felt like Jin Ling must’ve

felt back then, when they have just arrived to the past and learned about his father; when his outrage had caused the three of them to be punished with the board. Jin Ling's first physical punishment. Lan SiZhui had also never been whipped before. He had never received harsher physical punishment than the board.

Lan SiZhui remembered when Jin Ling got the board, so long ago. He was so scared, he wanted to escape by any means. It was only Lan JingYi's teasing that brought him peace and allowed the punishment to be ruled out. Lan SiZhui wasn't scared of physical punishment, but he was scared of the discipline whip. He felt his muscles contract, a reflex to fight or flee. However, he was chained up and could do either. He closed his eyes as the guards forcefully removed his top, ripping cheap fabric. The cold, damp air of the cell made him shiver, his Golden Core no longer able to protect him from the elements.

He opened his eyes and looked on as one of the guards he didn't notice leaving, returned. In his hand was an item that took Lan SiZhui a few moments to recognize. As the chief picked up the item, Lan SiZhui saw that this was the Jin Sect's discipline whip. This was slightly different than the one the Lan Sect used. While the Lan Sect's discipline whip was made of bamboo and because of this, it was rather hard – however, the Jin Sect's discipline whip appeared to have been made of leather. Lan SiZhui doubted this made this whip any nicer than the one the Lan Sect used, more so, just seeing the item made him shiver with fear.

“ChunYu-Jun, you've committed countless, serious crimes against the cultivation world.” Li XingXu began. He did not take the whip like Lan SiZhui thought he would, but this didn't reassure Lan SiZhui at all. “You took lives and harmed the innocent, without good reason. You offended the Jin Sect greatly. Our brothers are still suffering from the effect of your resentful spiritual tool, the Stygian Tiger Amulet. For this offense, Sect Leader Jin did not go easy on you. You are to receive twenty-five lashes with the discipline whip. As you know, just one strike is painful enough for someone to remember for the rest of their lives and takes a long time to heal. The scars will never disappear, so you may remember the punishment. However, you are to receive twenty-five lashes, for your offense was worse than even the tyrant, Wen RuoHan's, who was killed for his actions. You have not only killed hundreds of the Jin Sect, but also betrayed the Sect Leader's good faith as well. For this, this is your punishment, take it.”

Lan SiZhui looked on with growing horror as the person holding the discipline whip hurried behind him, preparing for the punishment. One or two strikes was typical. He knew people who had been whipped, he once met a small Clan's disciple who only received one lash, but since then, couldn't walk properly.

Hanguang-Jun from the future also received whipping, though Lan SiZhui didn't know exactly how many he took, he saw several scars on his back one time. For Hanguang-Jun to take it, it was beyond impressive, not to mention he hardly ever showed the scars bothered him. Lan SiZhui suspected they must, there were several times, especially when he was still a small child, when Hanguang-Jun would have days he didn't really move from the Jingshi. This connection he only made after he saw the scars on his back and asked about them; he didn't receive an answer, but since then, he also noticed that on days it rained, Hanguang-Jun moved slightly stiffer than usual, small things like that – that was when he began thinking about the scars, how long Hanguang-Jun must had them, did they hurt him, what was the

reason for them... He never spoke of these to anyone, since nobody talked about them. He didn't even mention them to Lan JingYi. This was something to ponder on in the privacy of his mind.

However, now he couldn't help but think – he saw a man who was crippled for life from only one lash. Hanguang-Jun, one of the strongest cultivators in the future bore several and even he had pains. What would twenty-five strikes cause Lan SiZhui? He couldn't claim to be one of the strongest cultivators this time, but even if he could, he didn't have his Golden Core's help now. He was not nearly as strong as Hanguang-Jun. Would he even survive this?

*'Your punishment is your punishment, if you're so scared of it, it will have the effect it desires to have.'* Lan SiZhui remembered this was what Grandmaster Lan told Jin Ling when they received the physical punishment with the board. This was something Grandmaster often told younger disciples who were about to receive their first serious punishment, and he imagined the man himself also heard similar sentiments in his youth as well. Lan SiZhui himself heard similar words when he received the board at seven, when he secretly followed Hanguang-Jun to Moling. Although this punishment was overseen by ZeWu-Jun, who took Lan SiZhui to the punishment holding his hand. Before they began, he quietly told Lan SiZhui:

*"Lan Yuan, punishment is supposed to warn you off doing such things in the future. It's not meant to be pleasant. It is going to hurt, and that is the point. It's alright to be scared."*

These past reassurances, however, didn't bring him great comfort in the face of such a harsh punishment. All he could do was to clench his teeth and try his best holding back his terrified tears.

Li XingXu nodded to the man behind Lan SiZhui and so, the punishment began. The first strike landed across Lan SiZhui's shoulder blades. The strike stung and burned across his skin. He buckled forward unintentionally, the guards' hands pressing against his shoulders and arms to hold him in place. The second strike came seconds later, this time from his right shoulder to his left hip, and Lan SiZhui couldn't help but cry out in agony. His cries were met with the steely gaze of Li XingXu and the grunts of the guard laying the lashes across his back.

In this place, Lan SiZhui truly suffered.

## Chapter End Notes

Names:

力星旭 Lì XīngXù: Lì: "surname/power/force" Xīng: "star" Xù: "dawn"

## Anguish II.

Lan SiZhui didn't know how long the punishment lasted. He lost count after the third strike, and he was confident by the fifth he was hardly conscious. Still, the harsh treatment continued, disregarding his screams of agony. He didn't remember the guards leaving, didn't remember anything but pain.

He came to his senses an unknown time later. His mouth tasted vile, and the smells around were even worse. His back wasn't even the only one hurting, for his shoulders felt like were about to rip out of their sockets. Lan SiZhui realized then, he was still suspended on the chains they secured him to when they brought him down here.

He spit on the ground, hoping to get rid of the taste in his mouth, but his mouth was dry and his saliva thick. It was dark in this place, the only illumination from the outside. There must've been a torch lit outside his door, for through a crack on it Lan SiZhui didn't see at first, a slit of light was let inside. Lan SiZhui did not have any strength to stand on his own legs, his arms holding his weight. Who knew how long he had been like this, but he had nothing left to support himself, so he bore the pain.

For a while, he cried from the agonizing pain across his back and the dull throb of burn in his shoulders. Then, once the sobs faded, his tears dried up, he just drifted in a pain-filled haze for a while, not conscious of his surroundings. He didn't know how long he was awake this time, but eventually, he drifted off to sleep.

When he woke, everything hurt. There was a deep ache all over his body from being suspended like that. His arm was numb and burning from extorsion the same time. Every breath agitated the lashes across his back, the skin tight and pulling. He didn't feel the cold, didn't feel anything else than the pain. He drifted again.



It was so cold. Lan SiZhui was burning up. Shivering, his teeth clattering together, he was clenched in sweat. Nothing made sense. Lan SiZhui wanted to sleep, but whenever he thought he finally fell asleep, he saw the hay-filled floor in front of him, saw the dark pool by his legs.

He needed to move. He had to get somewhere. Lan SiZhui moaned, willing his legs to work, but they were weak and one small movement agitated the welts on his back, causing him to cry out. He had to move and get inside the Demon-Subdue Cave. Didn't he? He needed to save Wen Ning from Wen Chao. Didn't he?

He could cleanse the Burial Mounds from the resentful energy. Get free and hunt Wen Chao down. Kill him like a common fierce corpse. Drag his body into a hole in the ground. He would be satisfied then. Wen Ning would live then.

Why was every breath so painful?





Lan SiZhui gasped as water was poured into his face. Once, when he was little, he fell into a river by accident. Hanguang-Jun pulled him out right away, but he had exhaled some water, which burned his lungs and he couldn't breathe for minutes after, even if it was only because he didn't know better. Hanguang-Jun reassured him he was breathing.

There was no water in his lungs now, but the freezing water on his face reminded him of this, of the freezing cold lakes and rivers of Cloud Recesses. They have brought comfort to him. However, this water did not, for he thought he was drowning, and as he shook it out of his face, stray hair and droplets of water touched his torn back. Lan SiZhui whimpered, trying to escape the pain, but movement only agitated his injuries. Finally, the burn faded enough that he could think past it a little.

A man stood in front of him, but it wasn't Hanguang-Jun. The dark corridor to the man's back was not Cloud Recesses. He had a bucket in his hand he let drop a moment later. For a long, long moment Lan SiZhui was deeply confused. Who was this man, where was he?

"He's awake now." The man said, and his voice reminded Lan SiZhui. He was in the Jin Sect's prison. He was being punished. This man...

"Tend to him then." Someone else ordered strictly, another familiar voice, and someone else was pushed inside. It was a woman. She was short and had peach-colored robes on. She held a basket to her chest, inside white cloth and a waterskin. Lan SiZhui watched her dumbly until the man spoke again.

"ChunYu-Jun." Li XingXu pulled his attention to himself. Lan SiZhui looked at him, not sure he was even awake at all, or if he was dreaming this. "This nurse will tend to you. Do not resist. If you make a move, we will subdue you." Li XingXu said. Lan SiZhui didn't understand. Li XingXu didn't wait for him to understand, though, but sent the woman forward with a gesture. She bowed her head and hurried, ducking under his chains, behind him. She was followed by a man carrying a lantern, who also went behind him.

"No!" Lan SiZhui cried out, tensing. The last time someone was behind him...

"ChunYu-Jun!" Li XingXu raised his voice. Lan SiZhui looked over with wide eyes at the man, who was clutching his sword hilt, but didn't pull it out. "Do not resist." Lan SiZhui opened his mouth to say something, but by the time the movement was done, the thought fled his head. He closed his mouth and stared at Li XingXu. The chief watched him for a long moment, then looked over his shoulder and nodded.

Lan SiZhui was shaking.

"I'll wash your wounds now." Came a quiet voice from behind him. He tensed even further, and even though this hurt, he couldn't will himself to relax. There was the sound of water being poured, hitting the ground, then a cold, wet something touched his shoulder where he wasn't injured.

Lan SiZhui buckled forward so violently, his shoulders popped. A moment later, there was a blade under his chin. Lan SiZhui looked up with wide eyes, straight into Li XingXu's eyes.

"Do not move, I said." The chief said, one word at the time. Lan SiZhui willed himself to relax and the chains rattled. The sword was kept in front of him, a warning. "Nurse, do as ordered. Sect Leader Jin is not tolerant."

"Y-yes, sir." The woman behind him stuttered quietly. Lan SiZhui hated having her behind him, where he couldn't even see her, but with Li XingXu's sword held to his neck, he didn't dare to move. She touched him again, gently. Lan SiZhui flinched, but not as violently as before. She got braver from this, reaching under his hair and pulling it away. Lan SiZhui gritted his teeth as the strands stuck in his wounds were pulled out, but he didn't cry out, didn't move.

"Sir, this might hurt. Please, don't trash around." She requested softly. Li XingXu's eyes flashed over Lan SiZhui's shoulder, he imagined at the woman in warning.

There was a pause, then movements were heard behind him. Rough cloth touched Lan SiZhui's shoulder, in the same uninjured spot again. This time, Lan SiZhui expected this and didn't trash around. He flinched slightly at the first touch, then relaxed once the cloth began to slide over his skin with barely any pressure. This wasn't so bad, until the cloth touched the edge of one of the wounds and Lan SiZhui whimpered. The material felt awful. The skin on his back was sensitive, feeling tender and exposed. He felt he had barely any skin left. He squeezed his eyes shut and did his best to hold in the bile that rose in his throat and not to trash around. He felt like he barely breathed, the times he felt he needed to inhale were pure agony on his freshly washed wounds.

This was a slow process. Lan SiZhui almost wished she would hurry up and be done with this, but at the same time, he felt even this was too much, too quick. He was so overwhelmed, so tense, he shook and whimpered, trying to keep his composure. Did it even matter anymore?

After an eternity passed for Lan SiZhui, the woman was done. She said 'sorry' barely audible. Lan SiZhui took in a deep breath in relief that this was over. As he opened his eyes, he saw that Li XingXu had returned to his spot in the door, his sword sheathed, his arms crossed over his chest.

Lan SiZhui swallowed air like he was drinking water and realized how dry his mouth was. He didn't ask for water though. The woman fidgeted with something behind him, which kept him on high alert, even though he now knew she meant no harm.

"This ointment will help soothe the burning. However, as it dries, it might become itchy." She said. "I'll apply it now, please don't be alarmed." She said, then gently touched the same spot on his shoulder. Lan SiZhui appreciated these warning touches greatly, even if it meant it was going to be followed by pain again.

He forced himself not to move, not even flinch as the cream was applied. It was cold and tingled a little on his wounds before it began to numb the pain. Lan SiZhui gradually relaxed at this. The cream smelled nice, but mingling with the smells of the cell, they made Lan

SiZhui's stomach turn. He didn't even realize he slumped back down until she stopped touching him. Then, he tensed again, awaiting another painful session, however, it didn't come.

"I cannot dress the wounds, they need to be able to breath." She said, then gathered her things quickly. She stepped past him, ducking under the chains, followed by the guard with the lantern. Before advancing further, she bowed to Li XingXu.

"Sir, this cell is cold and damp. He has a high fever and his wounds were almost infected."

"I'm aware." Li XingXu frowned at her. She looked back defiantly.

"Even though I don't know about this situation, I've also heard he fought Core Melting Hand during the last battle and got injured by him. If his Golden Core was affected by this, his body might not be able to fight off an infection or an illness caused by the state of this cell. Please, allow him to be taken to the infirmary until he heals."

"Nurse, you were ordered here to tend his wounds by Sect Leader Jin." The chief glared at her. "Not to make such shameless suggestions. Even if I was in charge of such decisions, I'd deny this. Go along and be done."

"Sir, at least let him down from the chains and give him something to cover him. Also feed him and give him water."

"Enough!" Li XingXu snarled. "A-Xun, take her!" He barked and a guard hurried inside, bowing to the chief before taking hold of the woman's arm, pulling her away.

Before she got too far, Lan SiZhui licked his dry lips.

"Thank you." He rasped out with a voice barely there, cracking in the middle. She halted the moment she heard his voice. She didn't turn, didn't say anything. She went to the door, her frame relaxing visibly once she was away from Lan SiZhui. Li XingXu frowned at her, but she ignored it, turning to him with a stern look.

"Young Master Jin ordered me to look after him. I'm just doing my job."

"I'm aware what he wants. I'm doing my job as well. Now go along." He answered without looking at her.

The woman hesitated, turning slightly back to Lan SiZhui, though she didn't look in his eyes. In the end, she nodded and hurried out of the cell. Li XingXu took some deep breaths, then turned to Lan SiZhui, his gaze still angry from the argument just now. "ChunYu-Jun, Sect Leader Jin informed me the first demands for compensation arrived. Expect to continue your punishment once you've recovered some." He said, then ushered his men out of the cell before going himself. The door closed harshly behind him, then the locks clicked shut.

Lan SiZhui chewed on his cheek, not able to express his anger any other way. The inside of his mouth was full of wounds by now anyways, him having bit down on his cheek and tongue multiple times during his punishment. After some time passed, he finally relaxed, his

stomach growling loudly. There was no point being defiant. It was clear he was banished here for an unknown amount of time. At least, they wanted him alive.

Lan SiZhui slumped in his chains, groaning at the resulting pain. However, it was much better than previously, although the stretch felt like his wounds were reopened, the ointment soothed the burning agony almost immediately. From this extorsion, he had no energy staying awake anymore and let himself fall asleep.



Lan SiZhui was more aware the next time he woke, not feeling like his head was filled with cotton anymore. At first, he didn't know where he was or what woke him, but then he heard the door open. It must've been the rattling of the locks that woke him. He looked up, expecting Li XingXu for his next round of punishment, but it was actually two other guards.

One of them was holding a tray, the other a torch. They came inside, then the one with the torch remained at the door while the other came forward. He put the tray on the ground and picked up a bowl. He raised it to Lan SiZhui's lips, and without warning or any other words, tilted it. Lan SiZhui realized just in time, and opened his mouth, letting the cold water flow into his mouth, stinging and uncomfortable against his dry throat.

He coughed as the guard paused, letting him swallow properly. Then, he drank again. After he was done with the water, the guard put that bowl down and raised another one.

"This is soup, don't choke on it." He warned gruffly, then tilted the bowl. Lan SiZhui ate it carefully. After this was done as well, the guard replaced the bowl and picked up the last item. It was a shallow cup. "This is medicine. Don't spit it out." He said, then gave him this as well. Once they were done, the men turned to leave. Lan SiZhui swallowed.

"Thank you." He told them. The one who gave him drink and food stopped and looked over with a confused expression. Before he could say anything though, the other hurried him out of the cell. The man went, the door closing behind them. Lan SiZhui was left alone once again, but for once, he felt something else than the cold and pain, finally having something in his stomach making him feel much better.

"Thanking them for basic care, how polite." A female voice suddenly said muffled, from outside. Lan SiZhui picked up his head, the movement pulling on the wounds on his back a little. He looked at the door, though he knew he wouldn't be able to see the other.

"Is there someone?" He asked, forcing himself to speak up. There was no answer. Lan SiZhui waited for a while, but then he frowned, slumping back down. Was he just imagining this? Was this his ears ringing or something?

"How shameful." The female voice said again and Lan SiZhui looked up, glaring at the door. He didn't answer, not sure this was real at all. "Wen SiZhui, weren't you a celebrated hero of the Sunshot Campaign? Weren't you the person who fought the fiercest against Wen RuoHan? Yet look where you ended up, in the same dungeon as the Wen dogs you killed so readily!"

Now that he heard more of this voice, he thought it sounded familiar. He frowned, opening his mouth to ask who it was, however, the next moment, another voice called out:

“Shut up, you vile woman already!” This was a deep voice, a man’s. This was also familiar.

“General Wu, aren’t you being very quiet?!” The woman called out. “After all, wasn’t this person the one to capture you as well?!”

There was no answer to this, so this was Lan SiZhui’s chance to ask:

“Who are you?” He called out. For a long moment, there was no answer, then the woman called back:

“You insolent piece of shit.” She sneered. “You even have the face to forget?!”

“Madam, I can’t see you. I have no chance to recognize you. Your voice sounds familiar, but I can’t recall. Forgive me.” Lan SiZhui gritted through clenched teeth. At this, the male voice let out an overly amused laugh.

“So polite! Ah, this person, he definitely didn’t change since I saw him last!” He said. Lan SiZhui frowned. He knew these people?

“Sir, I also don’t know who you are.” He said.

“Who else would we be?” He asked, still sounding amused. “I’m general Wen Wu, Wen Chao’s first general. We met in YiLing when you went to retrieve something.” Lan SiZhui frowned, hard to remember. It had happened so long ago... “We met on the rooftops. Your friends took offense that we had a chat before fighting.”

“Ah.” Lan SiZhui remembered. Although back then, he fought so many people. But... “Sir, I thought the Wen generals and leaders were executed.”

“Indeed.” The man said, but nothing more. Lan SiZhui pondered on this for a moment, but unable to think entirely clearly still, he decided to ignore this for now.

“And the madam?” He asked.

“That’s Wang LingJiao.” General Wu answered instead of her. So, this was her?

“Lady Wang, what are you doing in such a place?” He asked, utterly confused. How did she even get here?

“It’s all your fault, Wen SiZhui, so don’t you dare ask me that!” She answered angrily. Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Lady Wang, I have no idea what you mean.”

“Insolent! You claim you have no idea, yet it’s all because of you!” She sneered. Lan SiZhui felt like they couldn’t really speak normally like this. Before he could ask, General Wu answered.

“After I was taken from YiLing, I was kept in a camp. Then the others arrived and I was questioned; however, since Second Young Master Wen left me in charge of YiLing, suspecting you might return and attack, I didn’t know about the war plans. After, I was kept in several places until they took me to here with Wang LingJiao and a couple others. By now, most of them are gone. They died due to torture or killed by frustrated investigators who couldn’t get answers from them.” He paused, then with a slightly strained voice, he continued.

“We were questioned about you. Whether the rumors are true that you’ve been secretly working for the Wen. The others knew of no such thing, although they were the highest ranking generals and leaders in the QishanWen Sect.”

“But you and Lady Wang survived until now.” Lan SiZhui observed. General Wu laughed at this, then began coughing. After a while, frustrated, Lady Wang told him to shut up already. General Wu’s coughs faded. “Sir, are you alright?” Lan SiZhui asked with furrowed brows.

“Ah, I’m afraid I’ll be the next victim.” He answered, quiet, almost too quiet. Lan SiZhui was alarmed.

“What do you mean?”

“So concerned about a Wen, Wen SiZhui, did you finally decide to join your birth family?!” Lady Wang sneered. Lan SiZhui and General Wu both ignored her as he answered:

“When they questioned me last time, the guard stabbed me. They must think I’m dead already, because I haven’t been fed since then.” He chuckled darkly. “I’m afraid... It’s only a matter of time.”

“Good!” Lady Wang said.

“So, both of you have been questioned about whether I worked with the Wen?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“Yes.” General Wu said briskly.

“I’m sorry.” Lan SiZhui said quietly.

“What are you sorry for, kid?” General Wu asked, also quietly. “It was Wen Chao who spread this rumor. If his father wasn’t so set on his plan...”

“Plan?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused.

“Ah, right. You don’t know, but even though I knew nothing, apparently Wang LingJiao did. This is why she is still alive.”

“Shut your mouth, filth!” Lady Wang said, and there was a loud bang of metal on metal. There was a pause, then General Wu continued, quieter.

“We were questioned. She told the Jin she knew why Wen Chao made that rumor and made a deal with them. Only, this didn’t turn out as she thought it would.” He paused. “Kid, is it true,

are you from the future?”

“What?” Lan SiZhui blinked, looking at the door, the only place he could, confused.

“That’s what she said.” General Wu said, then chuckled. “As if someone from the future wouldn’t just go and kill Wen RuoHan right away!” He paused, then continued: “Anyways, the Jin seemed to believe it for some reason. She told them Wen Chao knew this and his father ordered him to get you to join their ranks, so the knowledge of traveling through time would be in the Wen Sect’s possession. That if you join, they would be able to right all wrongs.” Lan SiZhui remained silent, not wanting to confirm anything. “Anyways, this was what she told them. They seemed to believe her. She made a deal with them, if she told them this, they would set her free. However, since then, they left her down there. When she asked why haven’t they set her free yet, they answered they didn’t say when they would set her free!” He laughed in great amusement.

“You piece of shit!” Lady Wang protested, banging metal against metal constantly now, causing a horrible sound that irritated Lan SiZhui greatly. “Die sooner! Eat a rat!” This only caused General Wu to laugh even harder.

Lan SiZhui remained silent, closing his eyes, but he could not escape the screeching and banging Lady Wang was making.

After a while, thankfully Lady Wang calmed down and the prison silenced once again, though not for long. After a while, General Wu spoke again.

“Your name is Lan SiZhui, right?” He asked. Lan SiZhui confirmed. “Lan SiZhui, chief Li said you’ve committed serious crimes and killed hundreds of people. The kid I remember from YiLing was fierce, but also worked with the Jin. What happened that you turned against your allies?”

Lan SiZhui was quiet for a long time, unsure if he should say. In the end, seeing no reason to lie, he told them.

“I was protecting my family. They threatened them.”

“Why would they do something like this?” General Wu asked, confused. “Aren’t the Lan renowned and well loved people?”

“It’s not the Lan I’m talking about.” Lan SiZhui said. General Wu was quiet at this, however, Wang LingJiao was not.

“So, after all this time, in the end you still ended up with the Wen. How truly disgusting you are.” She sneered. “In the war, you kill your own blood, kill Young Master Wen, but then afterwards, you protect them.”

“I told Wen Chao several times.” Lan SiZhui said, frustrated. “I am of the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect, I have nothing to do with the QishanWen.”

“Is that right?” General Wu hummed thoughtfully. “Lan SiZhui, Wen RuoHan was born into a big family. He had many cousins and brothers. Most of them, he killed to be able to become Sect Leader. However, it is well-known that some of his siblings and cousins left before he became Sect Leader, not wanting to fall victim for a post they didn’t want in their hearts. One of those cousins was Wen HuoShan. He was the Clan Leader of the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect, but also one of the closest to Wen RuoHan. Since Wen HuoShan’s father died, Wen RuoHan’s father brought them up together and because of this, they were extremely close. However, once the succession became a question, Wen HuoShan left the main family to live on the mountain with his two brothers: Wen XiaoQiang and Wen ChanYu. However, not long after, Wen HuoShan died due to a nearby monster. Wen RuoHan was too late to save him, however, he accepted anyone from the village to go with him if they wanted. He also took charge of Wen HuoShan’s two children’s education and brought them to Nightless City to cultivate them. At the same time, Wen ChanYu also decided to go with them to learn how to cultivate. However, the third brother, Wen XiaoQiang refused to leave, since he also had a life in the village.”

Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. His back began to throb softly as they talked and thinking became a bit harder, unable to concentrate. “So, Wen HuoShan, who was Wen Qing and Wen Ning’s father was a cousin to Wen RuoHan. This means Wen Qing and Wen Ning’s uncle was indeed Wen RuoHan and their cousin Wen Chao?”

“That’s right.” General Wu said. “Since you claim to be the cousin of Wen Qing and Wen Ning, this means you’re also Wen RuoHan’s nephew and Wen Chao’s cousin.” Lan SiZhui felt slightly sick, and he wasn’t sure if this was because of the conversation or the pain flaring up in his back.

“I see.” He said quietly. There was silence for a long time after this. Lan SiZhui was sure he had fallen asleep at some point, but when he opened his eyes, the scene in front of him was unchanged. Nobody spoke, so he also remained quiet, not sure what topic he could bring up.

That the Jin broke their promise and kept Wen RuoHan’s people alive meant perhaps, he was not so stupid when he took the Wen without waiting for the trial. He wondered if Wei WuXian, in his own time as the YiLing Patriarch also knew the Jin were not to be trusted and that’s why he took the Wen without waiting for an explanation either.

This entire situation reminded Lan SiZhui of the time he and Lan WangJi were taken to the Nightless City. When Wen Xu broke their legs and they were forced to bear their condition without care – only back then, he had Lan WangJi by his side. He also wasn’t this weak back then. Even though he told Wen Qing he didn’t feel the effects of the Yin Iron, now he knew what she meant. Without regular meals, as poorly food it was in the Burial Mounds, then in the village they escaped to, he felt hungry and truly malnourished. If he had access to his Golden Core, he would be able to perform inedia, however, he had no means to that now. His meridians were still crushed. Without the Stygian Tiger Amulet, he was truly pathetic and useless.

With nothing else to think of, all he could do was to replay the scenes from Nightless City. He replayed the whole thing in his head a thousand times, and each time, he thought of something he might’ve been able to do to save Wen Qing. From stopping the situation from



getting so out of hand. Other thoughts also crossed his mind. Why did Jin Ling and Wei WuXian follow him? If they stayed in the village, Wen Qing wouldn't have followed them. If he didn't talk to Wen Ning on that day Wen Ning asked him about the conference, none of them would've gone.

*'What is done is done, there's no point dwelling on the past. All we can do now is to adjust to the situation.'*

Someone once told him, maybe Wei WuXian, he didn't remember exactly. However, how was he supposed to adjust to the situation? He also told Jin Ling, not all that long ago, that he would help him investigate Jin GuangYao. How was he supposed to do that like this? Without his weapons, how was he supposed to get out of this situation? Jin Ling was right in Nightless City. The Jin Sect was not going to go easy on him.

Since they were in this situation, did Jin GuangYao even have a plan? After all, they were here now. They were out of the way and couldn't stop his plots. Whatever Jin GuangYao's plans were, this was clearly a desired outcome, except for the Yin Iron, of course. Though, Lan SiZhui wouldn't be surprised if he also knew there were two halves of Stygian Tiger Amulet.

To know his own half was unharmed still gave him a strange comfort. It wasn't that he liked using the tool, but in these past few months, he became so dependent on the tool, he didn't know how Wei WuXian had the heart to destroy his half. Of course, Wei WuXian had his Golden Core intact still and also so many people didn't depend on him. To know his father was also the brother of the Clan Leader previously meant Wen Qing was wrong this whole time when she said this was not his responsibility. Actually...

If Wen Qing truly knew he was from the future, she might've also known his identity. Lan SiZhui was really careless with this. The Dafan Clan was small and everyone knew everyone. Lan SiZhui told them his birth name was Yuan and Wen Qing must've known there were not many people named like this in the Wen village. Maybe she even realized little A-Yuan was himself when he had, when it was revealed this was what Wen XiaoQiang and Hao YiFei named their child.

Why didn't Wen Qing say anything until her death?

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

The days were long and empty in the Jin Sect's dungeons. Lan SiZhui dozed and woke from nightmares he couldn't remember anymore. Screams echoed in his ears, but he was unable to tell if they were the echo of the past, of the second battle in Nightless City, or the resentful energy inside his body. His wounds throbbed distantly, but mostly his back remained numb. He lost feeling in his arms a long time ago, being suspended. Wen Wu and Wang LingJiao didn't speak much. Sometimes Wen Wu's coughs could be heard, and Wang LingJiao would shout at him to stop. He sounded weaker by the day.

The Jin came by every few days to give them food. Lan SiZhui was handfed, not being let down once. He didn't know if Wang LingJiao and Wen Wu were also chained up. His back

and shoulders burned agonizingly as he fed, and by the end of the meals, he was too worn out to speak, could only fall asleep fitfully.

Nothing changed for a long time. Nobody came by again to tend to his wounds. He wasn't even bathed. His joints ached, so did his injuries and his head and lungs also. He was weak, useless without Hudie, useless without the resentful energy. If only he could summon some strength, he could... what would he even do? Killing the guards was useless. The resentful energy couldn't free him from the prison.

"What are you humming, Lan SiZhui?" Suddenly someone spoke. It took Lan SiZhui a while to realize this sound came from outside his cell, not inside his head. He looked up, as if Wen Wu would appear in the door of his cell, but it remained shut and empty.

"It sounds awful, so he better stop!" Wang LingJiao said. Lan SiZhui cleared his throat and coughed a little.

"I don't know. What was I humming?" He asked. Soon, General Wu's deep voice began humming a familiar, though incorrect tune. "Ah, stop." He asked weakly. "This score is dangerous."

"Why were you humming it then?!" Wang LingJiao scoffed. Lan SiZhui huffed.

"I didn't realize. Apologies for disturbing the peace, Lady Wang."

"Ch!"

There was a pause, then General Wu spoke up, though his voice sounded strained and weak. "You needn't to be so polite with her. She truly is a vile person. Nobody liked her even when she was Wen Chao's whore."

"Watch your mouth!" She snapped.

"Wang LingJiao," Wen Wu laughed brokenly, his breaths coming with a wet sound, "you are no one. You have never been anyone. Wen Chao even got tired of you after he got injured in Lotus Pier and sent you away. You are so delusional, you think you have a voice anywhere. In reality, the only reason anyone even listened to your voice was because you were Wen Chao's plaything."

"You piece of shit! Shut the hell up!"

"Or else what?!" Wen Wu laughed even harder, though it sounded even worse. "Wang LingJiao, we will die here together! Does it matter what I say now? You're going to rot here for the rest of your life!" He kept laughing of someone who lost all hope. His laughs then turned to coughs and even after the usual time it didn't cease. In between the coughs, they could hear him gulping in harsh breaths, only to began a coughing fit again right away.

"Sir?" Lan SiZhui called out, worried. Wen Wu's coughs faded and they heard him gasp for some air, then nothing. "Sir?" Lan SiZhui asked again, turning his head as if he would be able to see through the wall to see the man. "General Wu, are you alright?!"

“Who cares!” Wang LingJiao cried, and metal banged on metal. “Die, you fucking dog! Choke on your own spit!”

There was a long pause, but General Wu didn’t answer. After a while, Lan SiZhui realized he had tensed and his back was stinging painfully, but he didn’t concentrate on that. However, after a time it became too much and he slumped down again, the movement jostling his sore joints. He panted from the extortion into the silence.

When the guards came an unknown time later, Lan SiZhui heard them talk through the open door. The two guards usually in his cell were there, so others must’ve come as well, because he heard:

“Hey! Hey, you alive?!” Asked one voice obnoxiously. There was a loud banging on metal, then it stopped after five or six knocks.

“What?” Someone else asked.

“He stopped moving.” The first answered. “Do you think he died?”

“I’m not going in to check.” The second person answered distastefully. “Leave him there. If he starts smelling in a few days, we’ll take him.”

“Hey, you guys!” Wang LingJiao unexpectedly spoke up. “When is Sect Leader Jin going to let me go?! We had a deal! I’m not dying here like that piece of shit!”

“Shut up, whore.” One of the previous guards said, and from the sound of it, kicked the door. “You’re not getting out of here anytime soon.”

“You guys, just ask Sect Leader Jin!” She insisted. “I’m sure I could offer something else to have him release me!” This caused a long pause, while Lan SiZhui carefully sipped his soup the guard gave him.

“Ha! Hear that, A-Xing? The whore wants to be bedded by Sect Leader Jin. She is truly shameless.”

“Lady, even if you weren’t so disgusting, you were Wen Chao’s whore. Who would want to bed you?” They laughed at this. In the meantime, Lan SiZhui finished his meal and his guards collected their things.

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui told to their backs. They didn’t answer, left without a word, closing the door carefully behind themselves. There was a pause, then a shadow appeared in the slit of Lan SiZhui’s cell door.

“Hey guys, how come only you’re allowed inside with ChunYu-Jun? The boss never lets us feed him, though we could give him a lesson about hurting the Jin Sect’s disciples.” He said with an angry tone. It was one of those who had been outside his cell while he was fed.

“Get out, Lou Xing. Chief Li’s orders were clear. Only the head guards are allowed to interact with him.” The guard who fed him said. Lan SiZhui recognized his voice, though usually the man spoke to him quietly giving directions how to eat.

“Nobody needs to know, chief Li won’t notice a thing. Give us five minutes inside.” Lou Xing said.

“Come on, Li Bing, just unlock the door. We will be quick.” The other guard who had been outside said. There was hesitation. Lan SiZhui tensed.

“I’m not opening the door for you.” Lan SiZhui’s guard, who must have been Li Bing, said. “You’re done feeding the woman. You have no business here any longer, go now.”

“You’re such a fuddy-duddy.” Lou Xing said, then raised his chin, spitting through the split. “What a disappointment you are, ChunYu-Jun.” He said. With this, he left, along with the others. Lan SiZhui let out a breath, relaxing back into his chains. He truly hoped Jin Ling received better care than this.

Exhausted from having to hold his head up and not choke on food, Lan SiZhui leaned his head on his shoulder and slumbered.



At first, he wasn’t aware of the sounds outside his cell, having dozed off at some point, as he always did; there was nothing to do here. Then the door opened and he flinched, although he had only received food the last few times the guards had been by. They took General Wu’s body some time ago. Since he died, Wang LingJiao was also silent, but Lan SiZhui had no illusions that she was dead. Anticipating another round of food, Lan SiZhui took a deep breath, looking up expectantly.

However, then multiple people rushed in, placing a low table in front of him, teapot and two cups placed on top of it, a vase with pretty wildflowers, a nicely embroidered cushion placed on the far side of it. Lan SiZhui looked at the flurry of activity with confusion. What was going on? His usual guards were there, as well as the chief, though he now stood to the side, bowing to the person entering. In the faint glow of the torches, it was hard to make out the man’s features, but Lan SiZhui recognized him nonetheless. His mouth opened, but no sound came out as the person stopped inside the cell. He gestured towards Lan SiZhui.

“Take him down.” Came an order. There was a slight hesitation, but then Li XingXu answered and gestured, Lan SiZhui’s usual guards coming over and removing the chains from around his wrists. However, since he hadn’t been on his feet since the first day, Lan SiZhui was unable to bear his own weight. Before he fell face-first into the table, he was caught and lowered onto his knees in front of it. The movements and from the hold on him, which pulled on his skin, his back screamed in agony. He thought he might’ve been as well.

He didn’t know how long, but for a long time he was aware of nothing else. When he came to, he was sitting in front of the table, his arms completely numb and useless by his sides. His back was aflame, like acid had been poured over his wounds. He spit out saliva that had been hanging from his mouth, not caring much about the state of his robes – they were spoiled enough as they were. For a moment the thought of Jin GuangYao bringing in a low table and having tea in this smell and cell amused him.

“You may leave now, chief Li.” Jin GuangYao said pleasantly. Li XingXu hesitated, looking over at Lan SiZhui, then back at their guest. He bowed.

“Lianfang-Zun, this is...”

“Thank you for your concerns, but ChunYu-Jun had clearly been through an ordeal. Even if he could move, I could kill him with a move.” Jin GuangYao cut the man off. “You may leave now.”

“But Lianfang-Zun...”

“Leave.”

“...Yes, Young Master.”

The guards hurried out of the cell, leaving Lan SiZhui and his guest alone. There was a pause, then Jin GuangYao reached out and served tea.

“Lanling’s *Red Dawn* blend is fruity and spicy, a mix that is both sweet and biting. A perfect blend of the Jin Sect’s generosity and ferocity. This blend was made personally for a previous Sect Leader, Jin BoXing. It is also my personal favorite. I hope ChunYu-Jun will also enjoy it.” He said softly as he placed the cup in front of Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui fixed his gaze on the edge of the table, willing his nausea to fade somewhat. Jin GuangYao didn’t speak for a long moment.

“ChunYu-Jun, there’s no need to be like this.” He said softly. “Please, let us enjoy tea together like we once had.” He gestured to the cup in front of Lan SiZhui. He looked up, not opening his mouth. Even if he wasn’t in pain and felt sick to his stomach, even if he could move his arms without feeling like they were made of iron, the Jin Sect’s beloved *Red Dawning* blend would definitely not be the tea he wished to taste now.

In his own time, Lan SiZhui didn’t really interact with the Jin Sect Leader. Before he died, Lan SiZhui might’ve met him five times total. Even though he often visited the Cloud Recesses and Lan XiChen, he barely interacted with anyone else from the Sect. Lan SiZhui saw him several times in passing, but other than polite bows, they shared no words. When they did converse, Lan SiZhui got to know the man as a quite forgettable character. He was polite and pleasant, but he was not warm like Lan XiChen. He was stern but not cruel, not unlike any senior Lan SiZhui knew. He wasn’t greatly knowledgeable or talented in cultivation. Until the plot had been uncovered, Lan SiZhui also believed he wasn’t particularly anything like the other Jin he knew.

Now, looking at him in his gauze hat, his expensive Jin clothes and serene smile, Lan SiZhui found him no different than how he got to know him in the future. He lowered his eyes again.

“Mn.” Jin GuangYao sighed. “When we received word from your guards that you were unconscious for a few days, Sect Leader Jin was so concerned, he sent down a nurse to tend to your injuries. I hope they made a good job of it.” There was another long pause, during which Lan SiZhui didn’t point out this had been so long ago, he hardly even remembered. Then Jin GuangYao took a deep breath. “ChunYu-Jun, this silent treatment is truly

unnecessary. We were allies once.” He told him. Lan SiZhui looked up with a frown. Jin GuangYao’s expression was embarrassed at this.

“Ah, ChunYu-Jun, your expression just now was just like MouShi’s.” Lan SiZhui blinked, his mouth opening. However, he needn’t to ask, for Jin GuangYao was ahead of him. “Ah, right, ChunYu-Jun, you must be anxious to hear about him.” He paused with a smile. “A-Ling took his punishment. He had been in seclusion for the past month, following the five hundred strikes he received by the board and the strike of the discipline whip.” Lan SiZhui stared at the other in disbelief.

First, there was his address of Jin Ling. Jin GuangYao in the future called Jin Ling A-Ling since he was born, but here, they didn’t share an intimate relationship – they hardly even shared a relationship at all. For him to address Jin Ling so intimately, this was deliberate. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to make of it.

Then, Jin Ling’s punishment... Five hundred strikes with the board was considered brutal. Add to that a strike with the whip...! Lan SiZhui was horrified on his friend’s behalf. Lan SiZhui haven’t even heard of anyone receiving so many strikes and additional whipping as well. And a month of seclusion, not even mentioning this meant they must’ve been here for a month by then, this was truly... If they met again, Lan SiZhui would take anything Jin Ling threw at him. Not only did he force Jin Ling to stand by his side and go against the cultivation world, he also caused such a serious punishment for him. Jin Ling might not have had his status here, but in their time, he was still Sect Leader. It would be a surprise if once they returned, Jin Ling wouldn’t demand his head.

“Mn, indeed, this was a harsh punishment.” Jin GuangYao said, sipping his tea. “But A-Ling took it. He said if the... Ah, I shouldn’t say.” He waved the thought off, though Lan SiZhui could imagine this was along the lines of insulting the Lan Sect for being harsh in their punishments, but also taking their example as a challenge that he could also take it. Though, he must not have known five hundred strikes were extreme and unheard of, and even he must’ve heard of the harshness of the discipline whip.

“Sect—Young Master Jin,” Lan SiZhui began, his voice raspy and his throat scratchy. He swallowed and cleared his throat. “Young Master Jin, Jin Ling prefers to be addressed by his birthname.”

“Mn.” Jin GuangYao nodded with a bittersweet smile. He wiped away an unseen blemish on the table. “A-Ling is indeed stubborn.” Lan SiZhui waited, but Jin GuangYao didn’t continue. Lan SiZhui was frustrated, was he waiting for Lan SiZhui to ask directly?

“Young Master Jin, you call him A-Ling even though this is not his preference. Please, address him properly.”

“Am I not addressing him properly then?” Jin GuangYao asked with a curious expression. Lan SiZhui frowned at him. Jin GuangYao said then: “After all, he is my nephew, isn’t it proper to address him so intimately?” Jin GuangYao watched him closely for his reaction. Lan SiZhui couldn’t hide his surprise entirely. Although he suspected it was useless anyways. They have suspected for a while now that Jin GuangYao knew they were from the future, but they didn’t know what he wanted to use this information for.

“Young Master Jin, I’m not entirely thinking clearly lately.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Could you elaborate?”

The other just smiled at him. “ChunYu-Jun, naturally, I know your secret. I’ve also talked to A-Ling about this.” Lan SiZhui didn’t answer, waiting for Jin GuangYao to say his piece. Indeed, moments later, he continued. “When I first saw him, it was not long after his punishment ended. He received me with contempt. I asked him how he was doing, but he refused to answer. So, next I told him I know your secret. He received it with further contempt, and rather rudely, asking me what I am planning on doing with this knowledge.

“I answered him the same I am going to say to you now, ChunYu-Jun. I want to help the three of you, naturally. A-Ling didn’t seem to believe this, so I also told him Sect Leader Jin also wishes to help. To this, he got angry. I told him this was true and he demanded to know what I wanted from him. Naturally, there’s no malicious intent here. However, in order to help the three of you, we need to investigate. Since this is sensitive knowledge, not many people should know about this. I offered to go personally and ask the Lan Sect to use their library, for there is the most knowledge in the cultivation world.” He paused, then looked down, shaking his head as if disappointed. “To this, A-Ling said some things.”

Lan SiZhui waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, Lan SiZhui was annoyed he was forced to ask: “What did he say?”

“ChunYu-Jun, he said he didn’t need help from a... Ah, I can’t even say the things he called Sect Leader Jin and I.” He said with a frown. “Naturally, those things aren’t true. However, when I asked him what made him say this, he just crossed his arms and refused to answer entirely. He demanded I leave. Since I didn’t mean to upset him, I left. Then a few days later I returned, hoping he came to be in a better mood. However, he still refused to talk to me.” He sighed sadly. There was a pause when he said nothing. Then, he said:

“ChunYu-Jun, since this is the case, I came here to talk to you. Even though your punishment is still undergoing, I dared to disturb it. It is... hard to see you all suffer.” He said, pressing his lips together. “ChunYu-Jun, the truth is, Sect Leader Jin didn’t really want this. He hoped you would see reason, first in the Burial Mounds, then in the Nightless City and take the deal. He hoped if you gave up yourself, you could talk like allies about this. Since this isn’t the case, he was forced to punish the two of you and not go easy on you. The Sects and Clans expect him to punish you severely for what you’ve done. However, Sect Leader Jin feels this is unfair. Since you’re not from here, naturally, you didn’t know Sect Leader Jin’s intentions when taking the Wen. After this, you were reportedly affected by the resentful energy of the Stygian Tiger Amulet, so you wouldn’t listen to reason. This is not your fault.” He shook his head.

“Since this is the case, please allow Sect Leader Jin to help you with this. He is desperate to right all wrongs we’ve caused each other.” He paused, but in the wake of his words, Lan SiZhui could only hear General Wu’s voice, distant and muffled from a different cell, thick with injury and illness: *‘She told them Wen RuoHan wanted the knowledge of traveling through time to be in the Wen Sect’s possession. That if you join their ranks, they would be able to right all wrongs.’*

“ChunYu-Jun, since you’re a reasonable person, I know you already thought about this. Have you come up with a solution?” Lan SiZhui looked at Jin GuangYao for a long moment.

Jin Ling had always been very judgmental of Lan SiZhui. He said he was naïve and not seeing the real side of people. That he lived a sheltered life. Jin Ling was right. However, Lan SiZhui was raised to see the good in people and not to judge easily. He trusted people to keep their words and not betray each other. During their stay in the past, Lan SiZhui also learned things weren’t this simple. Since they came here, his opinion changed drastically. People often claimed righteousness yet acted selfishly. They often claimed justice while committing evil acts in its name.

Righteousness, as Hanguang-Jun taught him, was entirely twisted in this world. Even if he wasn’t confident earlier, he now was sure. The events in the past that caused so much suffering, the events that caused the uprising then fall of the YiLing Patriarch were born from this twisted view of justice. Hanguang-Jun saw this. Lan SiZhui wondered if he also stood up against it, having those beliefs he taught Lan SiZhui in his youth, and that’s why he received punishment so severe, his scars ached till this day? Or did he suffer by their hands as well and realized this was not what righteousness was supposed to be?

He supposed he understood both better now; both Jin Ling for his claims Lan SiZhui didn’t see the world realistically, and Hanguang-Jun’s lesson. It was a lesson learned through pain and blood, for them all.

Lan SiZhui watched the tea cup in front of himself. It was a teal-colored set, carefully crafted. There was not one dent on the ceramic, not one air bubble in the lacquer. The tea pot was also like this. The painting on it represented a peaceful scene with a lake and willow tree, birds, most likely cranes, from the shapes of them, flying away.

“ChunYu-Jun?” Jin GuangYao prompted. Lan SiZhui looked up, realizing he had been silent for a long time.

“Young Master Jin, since we’re speaking, may I have a request?” Jin GuangYao looked at him in surprise, not having expected to receive a request. He nodded, gesturing him to go ahead. “Young Master Jin, I’ve been left here for a month, in my own filth. I request the generosity of the Jin Sect and ask for a bath before I’m returned to my punishment.”

Jin GuangYao looked at him with wide eyes, seemingly not understanding. Lan SiZhui kept his gaze, radiating calm.

“Ah, Chun-ChunYu-Jun, this is...” Jin GuangYao began, stuttering. He cleared his throat. “Naturally, your wish will be granted. Uh, ChunYu-Jun, what we just talked about...”

“Thank you, Young Master Jin.” Lan SiZhui bowed the best he could, his back stiff, his arms remaining by his sides. “The Jin Sect is beyond generous.”

“Of course.” Jin GuangYao blinked. Lan SiZhui smiled at him. Jin GuangYao hesitated, looking at him questioningly. However, Lan SiZhui didn’t react, kept gazing at him with a serene smile. This seemed to confuse Jin GuangYao, however, in the end, he sighed and nodded. “ChunYu-Jun, while this treatment is not pleasant, please understand Sect Leader Jin



has no choice. Don't hold this against him. As for what we just talked about, let us talk a little later. You're tired and have been through a lot. I'll return." He stood carefully. Lan SiZhui would, too, if he could will his muscles to work. Jin GuangYao gave him a curt bow, then turned and left the cell. As soon as he was out, several people hurried inside.

Servants took the table, dumping the untouched tea on the floor. They moved quickly under the watchful eyes of the guards, then once they were done, the guards moved towards him. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together – he didn't hope to be left without being put on chains again, so he accepted his faith. He groaned painfully as the guards took hold of him and lifted him to put him on chains again. Thankfully the guards worked quickly and soon he was released.

However, he was not left alone for long, for in the next moment, Li XingXu entered. He spoke lowly to one of the guards, who bowed and hurried out of the room. The chief faced Lan SiZhui, looking him up and down.

"ChunYu-Jun, Sect Leader Jin ordered your next punishment to be delivered now." He said, then the previous guard returned. In his hand was a cane. "ChunYu-Jun, the Nie Sect Leader, Nie MingJue sent his demands for compensation. You have wronged him, fought against him and betrayed his good faith in you. For this offense, he demands you to receive fifty canings on the soles of your feet. As you know this is a punishment more commonly used between a father and his child. Since Sect Leader Nie looks upon you with such brotherly care, be grateful for his generosity. This is your punishment from the Nie Sect, so take it."

With this, guards hurried behind him, taking hold of his feet. Lan SiZhui hissed as this put even more pressure on his shoulders and the skin of his back stretched as well, pulling on the wounds there. His boots were removed, then the guard who held the cane got behind him.

Lan SiZhui braced himself for the pain. This was surely going to be unpleasant, however in the face of the punishment he received from Jin GuangShan, this felt like nothing. This, he was used to, for punishments in the Cloud Recesses tended to be more brutal than this, the caning was a welcome gift from Sect Leader Nie. Lan SiZhui was indeed grateful.

The first few strikes were unpleasant and stinging, but not awful. This punishment was created with the idea of once it was done, the person should walk around with sore feet. However, once the punishment was over, his tingling feet were left underneath him, not having to put weight on them since he was chained up. Once the guards stepped away, Li XingXu spoke again.

"ChunYu-Jun, Young Master Jin just now was extremely generous. He ordered us to have you bathed, since your state was incredibly offending to him just now." He called out and two people came inside. One was the nurse who saw to him previously, holding a basket with clean clothes inside. The other was a guard, carrying two full buckets. He put them in front of Lan SiZhui, then hurried out and brought in a lantern. "Take this gift with grace and don't try anything." Li XingXu said, pointedly placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. He waited until Lan SiZhui nodded, then looked over his shoulder at the guards who had punished him. "Help her." He ordered.

With this, Lan SiZhui was stripped bare. Even though he knew she was a nurse and her job was to examine and care for the bodies of her patients, it was still extremely humiliating to be stripped in front of a woman. Lan SiZhui turned his head away, not even looking at her. For the Jin to deny him to bathe himself was cruel, but also not unreasonable – at least for Lan SiZhui. He didn't think he could even lift a cloth in his state, let alone bathe properly, so he was thankful not to have to do this himself, but at the same time, he hated this.

The nurse worked silently and efficiently. She didn't warn him with touches this time, and Lan SiZhui was glad, for it would feel way too intimate. She bathed his legs first, then rough, undyed pants were put on him, but nothing else. He didn't even get his boots back. Once she was done, Lan SiZhui looked over, seeing her silently gesture one of the guards to take the bucket from her and bring over the other one. Lan SiZhui was confused why they needed two buckets of water to bathe him. The question must've been on his face, because quietly, she explained as she gently wiped down his arms.

"Since your injuries are still fresh, washing them with dirty water would just lead to infection." She said. Lan SiZhui hummed and nodded.

"Don't speak to him." Li XingXu told her. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked over. Li XingXu was watching them with suspicion, his hand resting on his sword. Lan SiZhui looked away. The nurse worked carefully around his shoulders where the stars from the whipping stretched over his shoulders. Li XingXu frowned at her back, but didn't comment. Next, she went behind him to wash his back and Lan SiZhui tensed.

"The wounds are faring as expected. There's no infection. They should be, however, tended to again, to make sure there's no issues." She said, then began to gently wash it. Lan SiZhui trembled as the fresh water stung his wounds, but it was not the blinding agony as last time.

"What did I just say?" Li XingXu grunted. She huffed, the warm air hitting Lan SiZhui's shoulder blades.

"I'm a nurse, sir. I made a medical observation, I didn't speak to anyone."

"Well, just don't talk at all then." The chief said with a displeased expression. Lan SiZhui clenched his teeth as the cloth on his back caught on a scab. She apologized breathlessly, then continued working. Once this was done, she applied cream to the wounds. Once she was done, she gathered her things and headed out. Lan SiZhui thanked her softly. She ignored this and was escorted out the cell. Li XingXu shook his head as he, too, headed for the door.

"Dump the water, the floor needs cleaning anyways." He said in parting. "And give him something to eat and drink." With this, he left, the guard who carried the cane leaving with him. The two remaining guards dumped the water at Lan SiZhui's feet, then one of them left for a moment before returning with a tray. He was fed and given water, then they, too, left.

## Anguish III.

*“Lan SiZhui.”* Lan SiZhui startled awake by the sound. He had been drifting in a half-asleep state for a while now. Since he had been bathed, he had been left there for who knows how long. Since he had no means to measure time, it could have been hours or days. He lost time so easily, he felt like he was back in the Burial Mounds after Wen Chao threw him inside. He looked around, but nobody was there.

“Who is it?” He asked. There was no answer for a long moment, then from outside, Wang LingJiao called out:

“Who are you talking to?!” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“Didn’t someone say my name?” He asked back. Wang LingJiao was quiet for a long moment, then she laughed, ugly and mocking.

“Wen SiZhui, are you losing your mind? No one spoke since those dogs left! Only you’ve been mumbling in your sleep.”

“Ah?” Lan SiZhui was confused. “What was I saying?”

“Who cares!” She threw back. “I didn’t hear it anyways. Just shut up already, so I can sleep!” Lan SiZhui quieted then, not wanting to anger her more. However, after a few moments, his curiosity got the better of him.

“Lady Wang, may I ask a question?” She didn’t answer, but Lan SiZhui didn’t expect her to either. Instead, he asked his question without permission. “What you told the Jin about Wen RuoHan’s plans regarding me... Was that true?”

Wang LingJiao was quiet for a long time. Lan SiZhui didn’t think she would answer, but then she said: “According to Young Master Wen, his father was obsessed with the idea of traveling through time once he learned of your origins through Young Master Wen’s spy birds. He wanted to go back and remove his own Golden Core to be able to cultivate the Yin Iron properly. However, according to Young Master Wen, his father also believed you to be a misguided youth of their Sect. He wanted you to join his ranks of your own volition, have you swear the same loyalty Wen ZhuLiu also swore him. Sect Leader Wen was truly obsessed with special people. He wanted to collect them and keep them under his thumb, so they obeyed him alone. He could do this with Wen ZhuLiu easily, since he was the one to offer sufficient revenge for what happened with Wen ZhuLiu’s family long ago.”

Lan SiZhui frowned, thinking back of these so called attempts to turn him onto their side. For Wen Xu to break his leg, then for Wen Chao to work him like so. For then Wen Chao to attack him in Lotus Pier, then afterwards, throw him into the Burial Mounds...

“Sect Leader Wen made a mistake.” He noted. “Wen Chao was truly the worst choice to set on this mission.”

“Yes.” Wang LingJiao huffed. “Young Master Wen was severely punished every time Sect Leader Wen learned about his misgivings. However, by then Wen Qing was unavailable, and also wronged by Young Master Wen, so this was completely useless.” She said. “At least, that’s what Young Master Wen told me. It’s not like I care about these things.” She sneered. “For all I care, choke on your own spit. Everyone thinks you’re so special, yet you still cry for your big brother while asleep.” Lan SiZhui noted this, but didn’t comment on it.

“So, this is what the Jin wanted to know?” He asked. Wang LingJiao didn’t answer for a long time, then she said:

“They wanted to know what evidence Young Master Wen had of your betrayal. Wanted to know if you truly worked for the Wen.” She paused, then began laughing suddenly, almost manically, for a very long time. Lan SiZhui waited for her to finish to ask what was so funny. He needn’t to ask though, because still laughing, Wang LingJiao said: “To think Young Master Wen’s plan worked, only it was so long after Sect Leader Wen died, this is truly ridiculous! Wen SiZhui, Young Master Wen’s plan was to turn the Sects against you so you would see the Wen were truly generous, however, this plan didn’t work until now!” She kept laughing.

Lan SiZhui didn’t find this funny, however, it also reminded him of a conversation he had with Wen ZhuLiu during their duel in Nightless City.

*‘Inevitably, the world will turn their back on you, afraid of you. Your allies will look upon you as a monster. When it happens, I want you to remember this conversation, of the things I said. Last time I injured you severely and you turned towards the dark path. Since you healed quickly, not many know this. However, I can make sure you won’t be able to heal and your only option will be to use the heretic path to fight. The world will turn against you and you will see their true face, and how we are not that different from each other after all.’*

This was what Wen ZhuLiu said back then. Lan SiZhui didn’t believe back then. He thought he would be able to heal from the injury Wen ZhuLiu inflicted on him, and return to the path of the sword. However, since then, he had to realize this was not possible anymore. He had used demonic cultivation to fight the Sects and with this, also proved Wen ZhuLiu was right. While he was no one’s tool as Wen ZhuLiu had been Wen RuoHan’s, was he any different than him? Wen ZhuLiu’s family was killed, so he used an unorthodox method, unable to cultivate normally, to take revenge. Didn’t Lan SiZhui do the same?

Lan SiZhui might not be the new Wen RuoHan, rising from the ashes of the phoenix, but he certainly was no better than him.

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“Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui hummed in question. He was mostly asleep by now. Some time passed since he had his conversation with Wang LingJiao, and they haven’t spoken to each other since.

“Lan SiZhui.” Lan SiZhui frowned, shifting. The voice was close to him, whispering right into his ears. It was uncomfortable and put him on edge. As he moved though, the wounds on his back and chest were agitated and he groaned from the pain. He blinked his eyes open, but

the same sight greeted him as always these days, the dark and empty cell of the Jin Sect's prison.

His shoulders were hurting awfully this time as well, and he had a hard time breathing now. Lan SiZhui didn't pride himself on being able to take any punishment, because being proud of taking punishment was just fundamentally wrong. However, he could take most. This felt like it was pushing his very limits. How could a person with such wounds and pain be suspended like this for so long? Was the Jin Sect truly trying to kill him?

*"We could take revenge."* Lan SiZhui wasn't sure if he heard this in reality or if this was a stray thought. Perhaps this was a voice in his head. However, the words were whispered so quietly, so close and intimate, he flinched.

"Who is there?" He asked, thinking there was someone with him.

"You again, can't you just shut up?!" Wang LingJiao called out. Lan SiZhui ignored her.

"Who spoke? Who's here?" He asked, looking around, squinting into the dark corners. However, he saw nothing but stray pieces of hay on the floor. He shivered from the cold air around him.

"Who are you talking to?!" Wang LingJiao spoke again. "Just be quiet!" Lan SiZhui remained quiet. This seemed to console Wang LingJiao as well, for she also quieted. Lan SiZhui listened, but nobody spoke again. He relaxed, not even having realized he tensed. He groaned at the strain on his joints.

"Are you dying or what?!" Wang LingJiao snapped. Lan SiZhui rolled his eyes in annoyance, glad the other couldn't see him. It was quiet for a long time. Then, suddenly, there was metal banging on metal. "Hey! Hey, guards!" She screeched. There was a pause, then locks clicked and a heavy door moved.

"Stop banging your cuffs to the door all the time. What do you want?" Someone asked in a gruff voice.

"This person is constantly humming, it's driving me crazy!" She accused, even though Lan SiZhui wasn't even humming. Was he? He didn't hear humming just now anyhow. "Shut him up!"

"Woman, why is this my problem? Speak to him yourself." The door moved again. Before it closed, Wang LingJiao cried out.

"Can't you just stuff something in his mouth?! Or take him somewhere else! Take me somewhere else! We had a deal with Sect Leader Jin, you know! I paid up, so you can just let me out whenever!"

"Nobody is taking anyone anywhere. If his humming annoys you, put your fingers in your ears. Otherwise just stop complaining." The door banged closed and locks clicked again. Lan SiZhui listened as he heard footsteps fading.

“Break your neck! Stab yourself! Piece of shit!” Wang LingJiao called after the guard, though Lan SiZhui was sure he didn’t hear her. There was a long moment when nobody spoke, then: “Quit humming already!”

“Lady Wang, I don’t hear anything.” Lan SiZhui said, hoping to get an explanation.

“Of course you don’t hear it, since it’s you making the noise! It sounds horrible! At least hum something nice, otherwise, just shut the fuck up already!” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“I’m not humming, Lady Wang.”

“You said that last time, but General Wu also heard it, didn’t he?!” She demanded. “Bite off your tongue! Choke on it! Insolent person!”

Lan SiZhui sighed, circling his neck, sore from hanging there all day for who knows how long. He clenched his teeth, conscious of what sounds came from his throat, but there was nothing. Wang LingJiao also didn’t complain anymore, so Lan SiZhui just fell back asleep.

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There was a rattling at his door some time later. It may have been hours, maybe days, he didn’t know. He kept slipping in and out of consciousness, shivering from the cold. He looked up, seeing the guards entering. However, they weren’t here to feed him, for the next moment, Li XingXu and also the nurse usually tending to him with the guard usually coming with her also entered.

“ChunYu-Jun.” Li XingXu greeted him coldly. Lan SiZhui didn’t answer, so Li XingXu continued. “ChunYu-Jun, Sect Leader Jin ordered the next punishment to be delivered. The smaller Clans Yao and Su together demand compensation. You have wronged them, fought against them. For this offense, the Yao Clan Leader and the Su Clan Leader demand for you to receive two strikes with the discipline whip as compensation.” Lan SiZhui frowned. His back was still torn open from the last whipping. If he received whipping now, he would hardly survive it! Besides, if this was the case, why was the nurse here, with her usual basket in her hand?

“However, since we are unable to give you this punishment, Sect Leader Jin ordered us to instead deliver another method.” With this, he gestured to the nurse and her guard, who quickly hurried behind him. She prepared a cloth. Once this was done, Li XingXu gestured the guards at Lan SiZhui’s side who took a hold of him. Lan SiZhui was awfully confused. “Your wounds will be stripped now of scabs and salt is to be rubbed into the wounds.” Li XingXu said. “This is your compensation towards the Yao and Su Clans, take it.”

Lan SiZhui tensed. At the first touch of the cloth, he gritted his teeth, but soon he forgot about his defiance and cried out. He wasn’t sure when he passed out; while the nurse was washing his back roughly, or when the first handful of salt was rubbed onto it.

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“Stop!” Lan SiZhui jerked awake at the terrified cry coming from the other cell. For a long moment, Lan SiZhui didn’t realize what had woken him. His ears were ringing, his back felt like liquid fire had been poured over it and his mouth was dry and tasted vile. Then, the ringing of his ears stopped, only to begin again. This time, Lan SiZhui realized the ringing was not that, but screams. Excessive noise was forbidden in the Cloud Recesses. Lan SiZhui wondered who broke this rule.

Soon, the scream cut off again and someone began speaking. “Why are you torturing me?!” Two loud bangs followed this. “Wen SiZhui! What have I done to deserve this?! Didn’t you kill enough of your own blood?!” Came a scream again and Lan SiZhui squeezed his eyes shut from the sound. She sounded awful, terrified and in pain. This was what made Lan SiZhui a bit more aware. He could never ignore a person who was suffering. Hanguang-Jun taught him to help whenever he could.

“What is it?” He asked, though he felt his voice didn’t carry at all. He licked his lips and tried again. “What’s wrong?”

“Wen SiZhui!” There was another bang. “Stop!”

“Stop?” Lan SiZhui frowned, looking around. He wasn’t doing anything. However, as he looked around, he noticed the ink-like smoke surrounding him. He narrowed his eyes at the sight. He didn’t expect resentful energy here. Why not? He did not have the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s half. How did this get summoned then? “Stop.” He told the resentful energy, but naturally, it didn’t react to his words.

“Wen SiZhui!” Screamed the woman outside. Lan SiZhui looked up, seeing the door to his cell, and now he remembered who the woman was. This was definitely Wang LingJiao’s voice. Lan SiZhui wondered what happened, did the guards come for her? Were they violent with her?

“Lady Wang?” Lan SiZhui called out. However, his answer was only sobbing. He heard nobody else down here. “Lady Wang, are you alright?” He asked. She didn’t answer, only cried. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to do. He could do nothing, suspended like this, locked and chained up. Was this to do with the resentful energy? Cold tendrils of it touched him and he shivered, by now used to this sensation, not shying away from it, not liking it either. Without Hudie, he had no means to stop it.

“Wen SiZhui, why are you torturing me?!” She cried desperately. “What have I done to deserve this?! Have I not suffered enough under the Jin Sect?!” She wailed. The sound made Lan SiZhui’s head hurt, but it also made him feel bad for her.

“Lady Wang?” Lan SiZhui asked back. “What happened, why are you crying?”

“Don’t act clueless!” She screamed, angry again. “You cruel, horrible person! Wasn’t it enough that you annihilated the Wen Sect, you even have to go after me, while I never even wronged you?!”

“Lady Wang, is it the resentful energy?” Lan SiZhui asked, wanting to get to the bottom of her distress. As much as he disliked her, she didn’t deserve to be tortured. Why did she even

think he had anything to do with this? Why was she so scared?

“Like you don’t know!” She cried. Before he could answer, the locks to the outer doors rattled and the door banged open.

“What is this ruckus about?!” Came the voice of one of the guards.

“This person just attacked me!” Wang LingJiao claimed, her voice desperate and scared. “He was humming and shadows rose! When I told him to stop, he didn’t even answer me, just kept humming! Then these shadows began advancing towards me! I’ve heard as chief Li said Wen SiZhui uses a resentful spiritual tool to cultivate; he must still have this on his person and uses it to attack me!”

Lan SiZhui stared at the door in confusion. This wasn’t the first time she accused him of humming. Was he truly? He had been unconscious up until this point.

“Lady Wang, I’ve been asleep until now.” Lan SiZhui said. “I couldn’t have been humming. Are you sure this is what you heard?”

“You talk in your sleep, speaking of wanting to take revenge! Calling out for your friends and big brother and father! How could you not hum as well?!” She asked, banging her cuffs to the door again.

“You two, stop talking!” The guard ordered. They quieted and there was a long pause. “Nobody else is down here. Either the lady lost her mind and hears things or ChunYu-Jun is humming. ChunYu-Jun definitely doesn’t have his spiritual tool, so even if he was humming, he wouldn’t have been able to summon shadows. Wang LingJiao, I think you’re imagining things.”

“So, if he attacks the Jin and the others, he receives so many punishments, he will definitely die down here, but if a woman associated with the Wen Sect is attacked, she is imagining things?! I’m not going crazy, you idiot! Or if I am, it’s all your fault! Let me out!”

“That’s not going to happen.” The guard said evenly. “However, if you annoy me too much, I can cut your vocal cords. So, what will it be? Keep quiet, or have the surgery?!” At this, Wang LingJiao kept quiet. There was a pause, then the guard said: “As I thought. If I hear you making such a ruckus again, I’ll invite chief Li down and he will definitely not go easy on you. Shut up and behave.”

“Sir, she is not speaking without reason.” Lan SiZhui noted. “Resentful energy is rising here. Maybe you could—”

“And you!” The guard cut him off. “Chief Li ordered us to not even look at you when we’re down here. If you force my hand to punish you for this, I will get in trouble. You can rest assured, I will blame you and not hold myself back. Shut up, the both of you. Why don’t you reminiscence about old times instead, huh? Two Wen dogs, surely, you have a lot to talk about.” He said, then with this, with an obnoxious laugh he left, the door closing and the lock turning.



Lan SiZhui relaxed back into his restraints, hissing as his skin pulled and his still sensitive wounds throbbed painfully. He heard distant, soft sobbing and felt bad. He looked down, examining the resentful energy gathering around.

So far, he believed it was only possible to control resentful energy with a sufficient spiritual tool. If this was not the case, the resentful energy had too much killing intent and wouldn't keep the user alive. A special tool was also required to summon this amount of resentment. This spiritual power was typical to the Yin Iron's shard, since this was a strong enough tool, it took almost nothing to summon such energies. This resentful energy... It was either the result of the Yin Iron, or there was so much resentment, such killing intent in these prisons, that it manifested like this. However, if that was the case, wouldn't it have killed the people inside already? The only place Lan SiZhui saw such thing had been the Burial Mounds. Everyone knew one couldn't enter without dying. How was it possible to have so much resentful energy in a prison where only a handful people could've died, as there was in a graveyard where thousands have died?

It was not possible. There were only two plausible explanations to this, but Lan SiZhui had a hard time coming to terms with either of them. Either the Stygian Tiger Amulet's half was here, or, other possibility was that the resentment here was not as severe as in the Burial Mounds, but it was enough to emit such an aura – but for this to happen, someone had to call for it.

He was thinking about this deeply and didn't realize he fell asleep.

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He woke to sounds outside his cell, Lady Wang quiet for now as seemingly multiple people were gathered outside. They spoke quietly, but loud enough for Lan SiZhui to make out their voices.

“Stop being so paranoid. The woman had been complaining about him and Chief Li is otherwise occupied, it only makes sense that we're in charge and have to punish him.”

“Still, if they find out—”

“It's not like we're killing him.” Said another voice and a key turned in the lock. Lan SiZhui tensed. The door swung open, revealing three guards Lan SiZhui was unfamiliar with. Their voices were familiar at least, he was sure they were the guards who had been tending to Wen Wu and Wang LingJiao. One of them was holding something in his hand, another had a torch. They entered the room and sneered at him. Lan SiZhui tensed.

“Here it is, the Wen scum who killed our brothers. ChunYu-Jun, look at yourself. So pathetic.”

“You're not supposed to be here.” Lan SiZhui said, though he knew there was no point.

“Who cares?!” The guard asked and spit on the ground by Lan SiZhui's feet. “Wen scum, do you know who I am?” He scoffed. Lan SiZhui paused for a moment, taking in the man's face. It was familiar, so this guard must've been in his cell as well, but he couldn't place him or

find a name in his memory belonging to this person, so he shook his head silently. The man snarled, not taking this well. “My name is Lou Xing. My younger brother, Lou Song was one of those people you killed when they went to retrieve you from the Wen village.”

“I’m sorry—” Lan SiZhui began to say, but at this, the man slapped him. Lan SiZhui clenched his teeth – the hit wasn’t strong, but it still stung.

“You killed my little brother, you don’t get to speak. You also killed our disciple mates in Nightless City. Aren’t you ashamed?” He glared with wide eyes. Lan SiZhui bowed his head, but the man didn’t let him break eye contact. “Look at me.” He ordered angrily. Lan SiZhui looked up. “Wen scum, you’re just like your uncle, Wen RuoHan, aren’t you? Chief Li really went easy on you; it is up to us then, to punish you properly.”

“A-Xing, this isn’t a good idea.” One of the other guards said, who was holding the torch, looking behind himself.

“Don’t be like this, Bo-er.” Lou Xing huffed. “Didn’t he also kill your cousin?!”

“Well, yes...”

“Then, doesn’t he deserve more than what he got?” Lou Xing frowned at his friend. “The Nie, Su, Yao could all make demands for compensation, who asked us what compensation we want?” He turned back to Lan SiZhui, raising the item in his hand. Like this, he saw it was an iron rod with a flat disk at the end. “Wen scum, do you know what this is?” He asked. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Since that is the case, please allow me to explain.” He grinned, and began talking. “The branding iron is a low-level spiritual weapon. People don’t use it much in combat, since it is extremely impractical. However, it is often used during personal matters. One would use it to let the world know someone wronged them. This is not common practice in the major Sects, since they have a louder voice than the rest, mostly smaller Clans use this method to brand their enemies, were they to escape, to let others know the person wronged them. We, the Jin Sect, still have ours. We also used it on those Wen prisoners who we captured.” He paused, leaving a heavy silence for indication. “Since you’re the worst Wen scum we’ve captured, this should’ve been used on you the moment you crossed Koi Tower’s entrance.”

“A-Xing, we really shouldn’t do this. They’ll definitely know this was us.” The other guard said, sounding anxious.

“So, we will let them know it was us.” Lou Xing said. “We will tell them he was torturing the woman with his humming and we wanted to teach him a lesson about being quiet. Now shut up and come here, hold him.”

He ordered, then gestured his men, who, after some hesitation, throwing the torch on the ground, which cast an eerie light this way, went over to Lan SiZhui and took hold of his arms and shoulders. Lan SiZhui tensed, but didn’t protest. The man was correct in the assumption that he hadn’t really heard about the branding iron until now. He did know smaller Clans used it and also during the Wen indoctrination, he saw it himself as well. Since this was a low-level spiritual tool, one would think it wouldn’t hurt much. However, it still used spiritual

energy to inflict injury, and those were always more severe than ordinary wounds, so Lan SiZhui had no illusions that this would be anywhere near pleasant.

“Usually, this mark is placed somewhere visible, like the face,” Lou Xing explained as he came closer, holding up the iron to Lan SiZhui’s face. He could take a look, saw that in the red-hot glow, the end of the iron had the Jin Sect’s motif, the peony. Lou Xing snarled right into Lan SiZhui’s face. “But if I did that, I would surely be punished for it. Aren’t you so special, even your enemies look out for you so much? Don’t worry, this will still hurt. Although it won’t be as obvious as I’d like, you’ll still scream in pain. If you won’t, I’ll definitely make sure you will.” With this, he didn’t hesitate, pushing the glowing end of the iron to the middle of Lan SiZhui’s chest.

In his surprise, Lan SiZhui couldn’t hold back his startled scream of pain. The iron was only on his skin for a few seconds, but it felt like the excruciating pain lingered for hours. Lan SiZhui returned to his senses an unknown time later, panting. He was held in place by his shoulders, the guards not letting him buckle forward. However, his head was bowed and as he blinked, he saw the charred flesh on his chest.

He was allowed to rest for a few more moments, then someone took hold of his hair harshly, forcing his head up so he looked forward at Lou Xing, Who was still glaring in his face.

“I wanted to give this to you on your back, but they told me you’d definitely die if I did that. And you don’t even deserve the relief of death, Wen scum.”

With this, he stepped back and nodded his chin at his two companions. Lan SiZhui didn’t understand why until one of them shifted and punched him in the gut with all strength. Lan SiZhui gasped for air he couldn’t get into his lungs. They punched him again, on his ribs, then kicked him in the knee and groin before stepping back and away. Lan SiZhui hung from the chains and tried not to throw up from the pain. The fresh burn on his chest pulled uncomfortably on his skin.

“This isn’t nearly enough to make up for the pain you caused us, Wen scum.” Lou Xing said, his voice sounding distant. “But it will do for now.” With this, the three of them picked up their discarded items and left the cell, left Lan SiZhui hanging there in pain.

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He woke to screams from the other cell. Lan SiZhui shook off his fatigue, at first not understanding what the sounds from the other cell were. He was in extreme pain, but the sound of screaming alerted him more than anything, and he couldn’t ignore what duty he’d been taught from a very young age. He had to help.

“Lady Wang?!” He called out. She did not answer, kept screaming. Lan SiZhui was in trouble. He had no idea how to help. He had never controlled resentful energy without his spiritual tool and he was in pain, not sure he was strong enough to pull it off. The resentful energy, however, seemed to respect him, not attacking. This also confused him, but he had no time to dwell on it. He had to help Wang LingJiao somehow.

This was when he remembered faintly, back in the future, so long ago, Wei WuXian also didn't have his tool for a while, a crude bamboo flute to control resentful energy. However, at the time, he attempted to control the Ghost General by whistling to him. While the Qin language was more refined than Wei WuXian's methods, he would attempt it to save Wang LingJiao. No matter how vile she was, she didn't deserve to suffer like this.

The tune Wen Wu hummed back to him long ago was one to summon resentful energy. This was from Lan SiZhui's own scores, the one he usually played when he wanted to summon resentful energy. Thankfully, he also knew the score to subdue resentful energy. It took him a while to work out how to whistle it though, all the while Wang LingJiao kept screaming and begging for her life.

"Stop, please stop! Wen SiZhui, I'm sorry for the things I did and say – you know Wen Chao forced me! Please, stop this, it hurts!"

Lan SiZhui ignored the pleas as much as he could, concentrating on the notes instead. He was surprised to feel even without Hudie how the resentful energy reacted. Lan SiZhui understood now why everyone feared the YiLing Patriarch so much – for him to manipulate resentful energy this easily without his spiritual tool, it was truly terrifying. However, instead of this, he concentrated on the notes, feeling the resentful energy react to his commands, even if this reaction was minor and subdued, due to the weak nature of this method. However, Lan SiZhui didn't give up, battling with the strong killing intent. It was indeed very potent.

He didn't notice this before, since he was too out of it, but now that he paid attention, he noticed just how much killing intent was inside the prison, all around him. Most likely several people died here, resentful ghosts who had no escape. Their resentful energy had been rising since Lan SiZhui was shut down here. For it to reveal itself, someone indeed needed to raise it intentionally. Lan SiZhui briefly wondered if it was indeed him, who hummed. Was he unconsciously trying to take revenge on these people? Did he really go mad? Wen Qing said he wouldn't notice the signs since his meridians were crushed. Was this what she meant?

Lan SiZhui shook his head, concentrating on his task instead. His back burned, but he shut that out as well. His whistles were a crude replacement of Hudie's sweet tones. Qin language was to be played on a qin and the sounds of other instruments would not work nearly as efficiently, but if one hit the right notes, it could have an effect. Apparently he played the right notes, because the killing intent kept subduing, even if right after it flared anew. Lan SiZhui was fighting the resentful energy desperately.

He didn't notice when the screaming stopped, but by the time his whistles had any real effect, the other cell was silent. However, there was still killing intent here and Lan SiZhui had no way of knowing if Wang LingJiao survived, it was safer to keep whistling. However, soon the outer door burst open, several footsteps hurrying inside.

"Check on her." Lan SiZhui heard Li XingXu's voice, then the guards began fumbling with locks. Some footsteps headed towards his cell as well. "Open it!" Came the command and the lock was opened, soon, the door also banged open and Li XingXu stormed inside. He had his sword unsheathed and as he stepped in front of Lan SiZhui, its edge was held under his chin. "Stop, or I'll slit your throat." Came the threat. Lan SiZhui looked at him, then around himself. The killing intent was almost gone, the resentful energy not manifesting anymore,

even though it was still present. Who knew if he didn't go through the score it would return. However, the sword was pushed more into his skin, drawing blood. Lan SiZhui brought the song to a natural halt. There was no other sound in the prison, he couldn't hear Wang LingJiao's voice anymore.

There were footsteps hurrying over, then a guard appeared in Lan SiZhui's cell's door. As Li XingXu looked over, the guard bowed.

"Boss, she's definitely dead." He reported gravely. "She bled from seven orifices."

"I see." Li XingXu looked down, then over at Lan SiZhui with a dark expression. There was a pause when he said nothing, looking over his new injuries, however, he didn't comment on them. Then, he said: "Even though the situation is quite clear, explain yourself." He ordered. Lan SiZhui swallowed, the cold metal of the sword pushing into his skin.

"Someone summoned resentful energy. The killing intent was too much. I've tried to suppress it, but by then, Lady Wang must've been dead already." He reported quietly. Li XingXu watched him for a long moment.

"ChunYu-Jun, you are known to control resentful energy via musical cultivation. When we came, you were whistling and Wang LingJiao died. How should we take this? Should we believe you?" Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and didn't answer. He didn't know what he could say to convince the other, so he didn't even try. Li XingXu glared at him for a long time, then lowered his sword, eventually sheathing it. "Well, since it's like this, you remain the only living person down here, we won't have to worry about you killing even more people." He said. "I'm going to report this to Sect Leader Jin."

"I didn't want her dead." Lan SiZhui said quietly. "At least not like this." Li XingXu paused briefly on his way out. Then, he turned to one of the guards.

"Muzzle him." He ordered, then paused. "And find out who did this to him." With this, he left. The guard bowed belatedly, looking over at one of his peers, who shrugged. Lan SiZhui recognized the one who shrugged. It was one of those who came when Lou Xing burnt him only hours ago. The other who received the order frowned and looked around. In the end, he went off and returned shortly with two pieces of clothing. One he bundled up and went over to Lan SiZhui. Like this, Lan SiZhui could see this was the guard who usually gave him food and water his name was... Li Bing?

Li Bing took hold of his chin with the same emotionless way he fed him as well and forced his mouth open, then stuffed one of the cloths into his mouth. Lan SiZhui tried to pull his head away, however, he couldn't, Li Bing's hold on him sure and strong. Once he stuffed the cloth inside, he secured it with the other, tying it off behind Lan SiZhui's head. Once he was done, he looked at Lan SiZhui.

"What, no thanks now?" He mocked. Lan SiZhui frowned at him as much as he could with this muzzle. Li Bing huffed, then turned and left, closing the door behind himself. The lock clicked. However, from the outside, he heard Li Bing's voice still.

“Take her to the usual place. Make sure nobody sees you, some important guests have arrived.”

“Yes.” The guards said in unison.

“Ah, and deal with this mess. It smells bad enough down here.”

“Yes.” They repeated.

"And figure out where Lou Xing is. He has something to do with ChunYu-Jun's state and my brother won't rest until he punishes him."

There was hesitation before the guard answered: “Yes.”

With this, confident footsteps left, and several other footsteps began to shuffle. Lan SiZhui tuned out the sounds of them cleaning up, not wanting to hear. Instead, he closed his eyes, trying to breathe through the gag in his mouth and pain in his body.

He didn't notice he fell asleep until there was movement in front of his cell again. He raised his head, the cloths in his mouth by now soaked in saliva, feeling uncomfortable in his mouth. He couldn't even swallow to relieve the feeling.

As the door opened, guards rushed inside. Behind them, two other people also entered. One was chief Li, his dark gaze fixed on Lan SiZhui. The other was, surprisingly, a person in expensive golden robes. This time, there was no low table and tea accompanying his appearance, but Jin GuangYao still looked out of place.

“Take him down.” He ordered. The guards bowed to him, going over and releasing Lan SiZhui. Just like last time, he was unable to hold himself up, knees buckling. Two guards caught him while two others worked on his ankle chains. Then, his arms were secured with chains again, this time cuffing them together. Once this was done, the guards could hold him more securely under the arms, though this pulled on the skin of his back and the still fresh burn on his chest and Lan SiZhui sucked in a breath. However, because of the gag, he could hardly breathe. “Bring him.” Came the next command.

Lan SiZhui was moved for the first time since he had been locked down here. He was dragged outside of his cell, the guards not caring whether he could walk on his own or not. However, once they reached the steps, Lan SiZhui had no choice but try to go up on them on his own. Left to his own devices, he would have made slow progress, taking the steps one at the time every few minutes. Like this, he was forced up quicker.

The sliding doors were pulled aside, revealing the office building they came through that first time. Lan SiZhui flinched as the daylight assaulted his eyes, so unused to the bright now, it made his eyes tear up to even look around. He squinted into the light, letting his eyes slowly and painfully adjust, though this also caused a steady aching to start in the back of his eyes. Once his sight got used to the illumination, he could take in the room.

Lan SiZhui had faint memories of this building looking like an unassuming office building before. There used to be shelves all over the walls, packed full with documents. There used to

be a low table close to the back wall, where the sliding door led to the staircase and the prison. Other than this, there used to be not much else.

Now, looking around, Lan SiZhui was reminded of the guest rooms of the Jin Sect he stayed in previously. Gone were the shelves of documents, replaced by shelves tastefully decorated with items one would find common in a guest room. The low table was pushed to the middle of the room, a vase of wild flowers and the same teal tea set from before on top of it. On the two sides of the room were two privacy screens set up. Behind one the outline of a bed could be seen. On the other side, a woman stood, a basket on her hip. In this lighting, seeing her beautiful peach-colored robes and dark eyes, it took Lan SiZhui an embarrassingly long time to realize she was the nurse usually tending to him.

He was led that way by the guards. Lan SiZhui couldn't protest even if he wanted to. The last time he saw this woman she inflicted pain on him, washing off the scabs from his wounds harshly. He eyed her warily, but she seemed indifferent as she pulled the privacy screen aside to lead them to a bathing area, clearly improvised and not part of this building originally.

"Once you're done bathing and dressing him, make sure you secure his restrains back. And remove the gag, it's repulsive." Jin GuangYao said, then went ahead and exited the building. Lan SiZhui watched him go with suspicion. What could be going on? However, he didn't have the time nor opportunity to ask as he was forced to sit on the stool set up there. However, this was not pleasant. For one, Lan SiZhui hadn't been sitting for who knows how long now. The pressure this put on his back was painful.

His groans of pain were ignored as the nurse moved behind him. Lan SiZhui tensed, not wanting her, or by now, anyone behind him. However, he had no choice as Li XingXu came over and glared at him, his hand on his sword hilt pointedly. The nurse washed his back, but unlike last time, she was gentle and careful. It didn't matter. It was still painful. However, the bath felt good, once this was done. He wasn't allowed to have a proper bath, but the water they wiped him down with was warm for once.

Once they were done, Lan SiZhui was dressed into cheap, undyed, rough trousers and top. He was only dressed in this one layer, but Lan SiZhui was thankful, for the rough material rubbed on his sensitive back and chest uncomfortably. Another layer and it would definitely rub against them constantly.

Once his cuffs were secured back in place, Li XingXu stepped forward. "We're going to remove your gag, but don't think you can try anything. One melodic tone from you and I'll cut you down like a pig. Do you understand?"

Lan SiZhui nodded, just wanting the cloth gone from his mouth. One of the guards untied the strip that held the balled up material in place. As they pulled the ball out, Lan SiZhui thought he was going to hurl; immediately, there was a bucket pushed under his chin, as if these people were afraid he was going to spoil his new clothes. He didn't throw up, and soon, he was also washed in the face, the guards not letting him do this either. Once they were done, Lan SiZhui was pulled on his feet, which were now chained together as well. He was pulled into the room proper, Lan SiZhui stumbling along clumsily on uncoordinated, weak legs. He was pushed down in front of the low table, his back to the sliding door, facing the door outside.

“Leave.” Li XingXu ordered and the nurse gathered her things, bowing to the chief before leaving. This was the first time Lan SiZhui took a glance at the world outside. Until now, he didn’t realize, but as he saw some green trees in the slit the nurse slid out of, he also realized it was warmer here, enough so that one layer was enough for now. It must’ve turned to spring in the meantime. Lan SiZhui still shivered, but this was because of the cold seeping into his bones – he felt after the prison, he would never be warm again.

“ChunYu-Jun.” Li XingXu called out, and Lan SiZhui looked up, seeing the guard crouching on the other side of the table, looking at him with a frown. Lan SiZhui’s eyebrow twitched, but he didn’t react otherwise. “Someone is going to come and visit you. You may not talk about your punishment. You may not talk about the location of the prison. You may not talk about the people you were in prison with. You may not talk about the people tending to you during your punishment. These are Sect Leader Jin’s orders. If you break any of these rules, I will kill you. If you make an attempt on anyone’s life, I’ll kill you. If you try to escape, I’ll kill you.”

Lan SiZhui glared and licked dry lips.

“Sir, earlier you said if I make a melodic sound, you’re also going to kill me. Can I talk to this person at all, or is my speech too melodic?” The following slap was expected, but not less painful for it. Lan SiZhui fell over, landing on his elbow hard, the movement sending a wildfire of pain up his back. Li XingXu either didn’t hold back or was much stronger than Lou Xing had been last time. He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut.

“ChunYu-Jun, it is quite brave of you to talk like this.” He said, then rose to his feet. “Remember the rules. After all, once you were a Lan Sect disciple. From what I know, you have over three thousand rules on your wall of discipline.” He went over and yanked Lan SiZhui up into a sitting position. This movement rubbed the coarse material of his top against his chest and Lan SiZhui cried out, straightening up to avoid the pull anymore. Once he was sitting, Li XingXu stepped slightly behind him.

The next moment, there was a knock on the door. The two guards still inside, who dragged Lan SiZhui out here, one of them Li Bing, hurried over and opened the door. They bowed to whoever was on the other side deeply and greeted them. They were quickly dismissed and the two of them took their positions, either on the both sides of the doors, facing Lan SiZhui but not looking at him, their faces made of stone, their hands on their sword hilt, able to draw them any moment.

The people in the doorway captured Lan SiZhui’s attention more. He stared in naked wonder as Jin GuangYao led two people inside. One was in more expensive clothes than Lan SiZhui ever seen, the other in subdued, light blue robes, elegant but not showing off wealth as the other had. He instinctively straightened, his mouth opening.

“ZeWu-Jun.” Jin GuangShan began, turning to the other after sweeping his gaze over the room. “He is here as promised.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen answered, looking at Lan SiZhui. His gaze was searching, pausing on multiple occasions – on the cheap robes he wore, on his cuffed hands in his lap, on the side of his face where Li XingXu just hit him, on his hair that, Lan SiZhui just realized, the nurse



never washed. After taking him in, his gaze went over Lan SiZhui's shoulder, probably landing on Li XingXu behind his left shoulder. There was a slight furrow between his brows.

"ZeWu-Jun, you wanted to see him with your own eyes." Jin GuangShan told the other Sect Leader. "We're disturbing his punishment, and this part of Koi Tower is secluded and quite ugly. Why don't we go back and continue the discussion over tea?"

There was a long pause, Lan XiChen looking over the room quickly. He didn't even look at Jin GuangShan as he spoke coldly:

"Sect Leader Jin, as you agreed, I'm here to speak with SiZhui." He didn't elaborate and Jin GuangShan looked annoyed. He looked over at Jin GuangYao, who bowed to his father then hurried over behind Lan SiZhui. He tensed at the presence at his back and Lan XiChen's gaze snapped to him. Lan SiZhui looked down as he heard Jin GuangYao whisper something to Li XingXu.

"Yes." Li XingXu answered quietly. Jin GuangShan looked on gravely, then nodded.

"ZeWu-Jun, as previously stated, ChunYu-Jun recently killed one of the prisoners he was locked up with, this is why we had to move him to this place." Jin GuangYao said from behind Lan SiZhui. His back hurt from holding himself back from moving. "It is dangerous to be left alone with him."

Lan XiChen frowned, the tiniest movement of his lips. "Sect Leader Jin," he began, blatantly ignoring Jin GuangYao's advance to talk in his father's stead. "If you're implying I'm not good enough to defend myself from a person who is clearly chained up and had been severely punished, I will have no choice but to take this as an insult towards the Lan Sect of Gusu."

Lan SiZhui's eyes widened at this. This was not good. Lan XiChen was very hostile towards Jin GuangShan, and it seemed even the fact they were here was forced, this meant the tension between the two Sects had not eased during Lan SiZhui's punishment. If this got out of hand, this could lead to worse things than petty insults exchanged. If this turned into a fight...

Jin GuangShan took a deep breath, glaring at Lan XiChen. However, he didn't want a fight either, this was obvious. He said: "Since I've already agreed, I'll hold myself to this deal. However, ZeWu-Jun, I'm afraid the guards will have to stay. You can be assured of their discretion, they're here to keep ChunYu-Jun in line."

Lan XiChen clenched his teeth, disliking it. However, he could hardly claim an intimate discussion between a Sect Leader and his disciple to be left alone. In the end, he blinked flatly and inclined his head.

"So be it." Jin GuangShan pressed his lips together and looked over behind Lan SiZhui, where Jin GuangYao must've stood. After a pause, the Young Master of the Jin Sect went back to his father's side. "We will leave you to it then. A-Yao will wait for you outside. Don't worry, this building is equipped with a silencing charm, once the doors are closed, nothing will be heard outside." He said, then when Lan XiChen inclined his head in acknowledgement, Jin GuangShan and Jin GuangYao left, the latter bowing to Lan XiChen before going outside, pulling the door closed behind himself.

Lan SiZhui watched as Lan XiChen waited for a moment. Then the Lan Sect Leader turned, went to the door. For a moment, Lan SiZhui thought he was leaving as well, but the other just pulled on the sliding doors. There was a click. Lan SiZhui realized Jin GuangYao mustn't have closed it properly. Once the door was properly closed, Lan XiChen glanced at the two guards at the door, then turned and went over to the low table, pausing and looking at Li XingXu behind Lan SiZhui's shoulder. He sat carefully, placing his sword by his side. Next, he pulled Liebing from his sleeve.

"Sir." Li XingXu suddenly spoke, before Lan XiChen could even raise the flute to his lips. "Inflicting harm on a prisoner should be discussed and permitted by Sect Leader Jin first."

"They you must've received permission to slap him just now." Lan XiChen said, his tone ice-cold. There was a long pause, then Lan XiChen sighed. "Thank you for looking out for Lan SiZhui's safety as well as mine, but I can assure you, there's nothing to fear from the Sect Leader of the Lan Sect."

There was a pause. Then, there was the rustle of clothes and Li XingXu said, in a clear, loud voice:

"Sect Leader Lan, forgive this one for his insolence." Lan XiChen glared at him for a moment, then took a deep breath. He returned to his previous position, turning to Lan SiZhui once again. He raised Liebing to his lips.

*Cleansing's* sweet melody through Liebing felt soothing to Lan SiZhui's soul. He closed his eyes and allowed the melody to wash over him. He couldn't feel the effects, but Wen Qing theorized *Cleansing* would help with the resentful energy. Figuring this is why Lan XiChen played it now, he concentrated on the notes, letting them ease his mind.

The song was over soon, and Lan XiChen returned the instrument to his sleeve. Lan SiZhui opened his eyes and looked at him calmly. Lan XiChen looked back at him gravely.

"SiZhui, how are you feeling?" He asked. Lan SiZhui smiled at him weakly.

"I've been better, ZeWu-Jun." He said, not elaborating. The burn on his chest was still fresh and his torso still hurt from the punches he received.

"Sect Leader Jin said you killed someone." He said questioningly. Lan SiZhui glanced slightly behind himself, Li XingXu's robes just in his line of sight. Lan XiChen also glanced at the man, and in the end, didn't ask about this, just pressed his lips together. "I've been having negotiations with Sect Leader Jin to have you transferred back to the Cloud Recesses. He refuses to budge." Lan XiChen told him. "I'm afraid if I push more, the tension between the Sects might become too much."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui hummed. "Sect Leader Lan, there's no need. Since this is what the Sects decided, my place should be here." Lan XiChen watched him for a moment, then shook his head.

"SiZhui, even though I know you're right and that where you're from doesn't excuse your actions, I can't help but feel this is wrong." He frowned. "As a child, you were wronged."

Now, as a young man, you've faced the same things, except now, you had the power to do something against this. Maybe you didn't go about this the right way, but was it truly wrong of you to act out like this?" Lan SiZhui looked down.

"ZeWu-Jun, the truth is, you're only thinking like this because you know the truth. If you didn't, do you think you saw my actions in the same light?"

"I might not have understood at first..." Lan XiChen said slowly, working through this proposition. "However, after seeing how desperate you were, I would have definitely questioned your motivation. I think you'd have had enough evidence to convince me without revealing the truth. Even though Jin GuangShan doesn't know the truth, he should see this as well. You should be punished, no doubt about it, but to be so harsh and refuse anyone to even know if you're alive for three months..."

To this, Lan SiZhui picked up his head, looking at Lan XiChen in disbelief.

"Three months?" Lan XiChen furrowed his brows at him in response.

"Yes. The battle in Nightless City had been three months ago."

That wasn't right. When Jin GuangYao came to visit him, he said only a month had passed. That couldn't have been more than a few short weeks ago – even though it was hard to tell in that cell. Lan SiZhui slept much and irregularly, not having anything else to do and weak from the beatings he received.

"If chief Li hadn't come to inform Sect Leader Jin you've apparently killed a prison mate a day ago, I wouldn't have known you were even alive. Sect Leader Jin refused to say, only reassuring you were receiving your punishment."

Lan SiZhui frowned. Even this didn't feel right. Wang LingJiao's death was only a few hours ago, wasn't it? Lan SiZhui shook his head. Did it really matter how long he had been here? He looked up.

"ZeWu-Jun... How are the others, do you know?" Lan XiChen pursed his lips.

"I know. Jin Ling had been sentenced to five hundred strikes with the board, a strike with the discipline whip and secluded for a month to reflect on his mistakes. He had been returned to train with the Sect disciples and watched closely. Wei WuXian also received his punishment, though I'm unsure what exactly it was. I know he had been sentenced for seclusion for six months. His punishment must've been harsh enough, because he'd been trying to get out of Lotus Pier before receiving it, but since then, he took it without much complaint. As for WangJi and JingYi..." He trailed off, looking down. "They each received two strikes with the discipline whip and a year of seclusion." Lan SiZhui watched Lan XiChen in horror. Lan XiChen pressed his lips together. Lan SiZhui had no right to judge his decisions, but two strikes with the discipline whip... Lan XiChen inhaled. "The elders were unmovable in this matter. At least, I was in charge of the rest."

"The rest?" Lan SiZhui asked, horrified. There was more? Lan XiChen glanced over at Li XingXu, then shook his head subtly, signaling he wouldn't tell Lan SiZhui here.

“SiZhui, Sect Leader Jin refuses to say what your punishment involved.” He said questioningly. However, even without Li XingXu’s threats, Lan SiZhui wouldn’t tell him, so he remained silent. Lan XiChen sighed. “SiZhui, to resolve this situation... Even though you submit to your punishment, as you should, your place is not here. The war is over and the Wen had been excused.”

“There are still things to do.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “Jin Ling’s uncle...”

“SiZhui, I don’t know about Jin Ling’s uncle. All three of you claim he did something unforgivable, but so far I’ve gotten to know him as a kind young man, perhaps a little more curious about other people’s business and slightly submissive in the face of the Sect Leader, but so far I’ve seen nothing that would imply he is malicious. Are you sure this isn’t just paranoia speaking, due to your experiences?”

“I’m sure.” Lan SiZhui told him gravely. “If you’d like to know more about this, I suggest you to talk to Jin Ling. He can tell you everything that went down in the Guanyin temple.” He paused, then added: “Also, I’ve talked to him since. So did Jin Ling.”

“You did?” Lan XiChen asked, surprised. Lan SiZhui nodded.

“He revealed he knows the secret. He also claims he wants to help.”

“Then...” Lan XiChen frowned at him. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“In order to help us, he wants to study the method that took us here.” Lan SiZhui told him pointedly. “You think we’re paranoid, but how could we not with this knowledge? We’re only three teenagers and look how much we’ve changed the world. What could a person do who has more to gain with this than us?”

There was a long pause while Lan XiChen thought this through. In the end, he pressed his lips together and sighed. “I’m not going to claim to know more about this than you. You’re right, I was wrong to suggest your worry is unfounded. I have no knowledge about this.”

“This was your request.” Lan SiZhui reminded him. Lan XiChen smiled at him.

“And nobody is more frustrated with this decision than I am. But I also know this was the right decision. Although I don’t know what it would hurt at this point to learn about it.”

“If ZeWu-Jun wishes to know...” Lan SiZhui glanced behind himself. “ZeWu-Jun knows how to get this information.”

“Indeed.” Lan XiChen nodded, also glancing at Li XingXu, then back at Lan SiZhui. “So, what is the plan then, regarding this issue?” He asked. Lan SiZhui thought for a moment.

“I’m not sure. I wouldn’t dare to suggest anything. Jin Ling should be the one to decide how to proceed. Unfortunately, with my punishment, I haven’t been able to help him yet.” He pressed his lips together.

He didn’t know what Jin Ling planned. While they knew Jin GuangYao was up to something and also knew what he had done in the future, all that haven’t happened yet and he haven’t

moved forward with his plans yet. Because of this, how could they do anything? In the future, Jin GuangYao had already sabotaged the YiLing Patriarch in Qiongqi to kill Jin ZiXuan and in Nightless City so the massacre was worse than imaginable. But here, all he had done was possibly draw a map for Wen Chao and possibly wanting to know how to travel in time. He killed nobody important yet and did nothing that should prompt the Sects to turn against him as well.

This was difficult. If Jin Ling wanted to do anything, they needed some kind of leverage. They would also need to figure out how to stop him – in the future, Baxia's sword spirit was so savage the Guanyin temple collapsed, burying him underneath. They couldn't kill him now, wouldn't even want to. But Jin Ling was set on doing something about the situation. Unfortunately, short of waiting until Jin GuangYao did something malicious, Lan SiZhui was afraid there was not much to do.

He wished he could talk to Jin Ling about this, to ask what he wanted to do.

"This punishment... Sect Leader Jin refuses to tell anyone what your sentence is exactly." Lan XiChen shook his head with a thoughtful expression. "Although I've talked to MingJue and also heard of the Su Clan's plans for the demand..." He trailed off, looking up at Lan SiZhui with furrowed brows and a worried expression. Lan SiZhui didn't understand until he realized the Su and Yao Clans together demanded two strikes with the discipline whip. The expression had to be because of this. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and looked down, not wanting to confirm or deny anything. Lan XiChen heaved a sigh and as Lan SiZhui looked up, he saw him with his eyes closed, his expression grave.

"ZeWu-Jun; Jin Ling, JingYi and Hanguang-Jun also received strikes with the discipline whip." He said quietly. "If they could take it, so can I."

Lan XiChen looked at him sadly, but nodded. "I'll still try to inquire Sect Leader Jin about this. They cannot keep you here forever." Lan SiZhui wanted to shrug at that. What was there the Sects couldn't do? After all, the Ghost General was kept for thirteen years. Although they did say he died with the rest of the Wen, so people weren't looking for him either.

"Alright." He agreed lightly.

"I have to go now. I'll try to talk to Jin Ling as well, although that will be harder to pull off." Lan XiChen turned thoughtful, then shook it off and stood. Lan SiZhui would stand as well, if he could, if he was allowed. Li XingXu was still at his back. There was a pause, then Lan XiChen looked back at him. "SiZhui, despite the punishment, they keep you here alright?"

Lan SiZhui looked back at him, feeling a little emotional because of the question. He couldn't answer this, however, Li XingXu's earlier words echoing in his head, so he just smiled back at the Lan Sect Leader. Lan XiChen furrowed his brow, looking over at Li XingXu, as if knowing the man forbid Lan SiZhui from speaking. In the end, he nodded.

"I will come by again if I can." Lan XiChen said, then headed outside. The guards actually pulling the door open for him, revealing Jin GuangYao waiting outside. The Young Master of the Jin Sect bowed to Lan XiChen.

“Sect Leader Lan, Sect Leader Jin is waiting for us back in the reception hall. Let us go.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded and followed Jin GuangYao. The door closed behind them. There was a pause, then the guards began moving.

“Take him down and chain him up.” Li XingXu ordered. “A-Bing, as soon as you found the perpetrator who beat him up, bring them to me.”

“Yes.”

The guards bowed to him then went around the table, taking hold of Lan SiZhui’s arms, pulling him up. This movement pulled painfully on the sensitive skin of his back and chest and Lan SiZhui hissed, gritting his teeth. The journey downstairs was even worse than the one up. Several times Lan SiZhui thought he was going to fall down the steps. The guards held him surely though, led him back to his cell. Now that the rest of the prison was empty, Lan SiZhui saw that the rest of the cells’ doors were open, revealing the same kind of cell he was locked into, all empty. He wondered which one Wang LingJiao and Wen Wu were locked into. He suspected Wang LingJiao was locked into one on the other side from his side, close to the steps. Wen Wu was definitely closer to him and on his side.

The guards took him inside his own cell then, quickly exchanging his cuffs to the chains. With this finished, they turned, left the cell, closing the door behind themselves and locking it carefully. Lan SiZhui huffed. What was the point of locking the door, since he was already chained up, unable to move an inch forward?

His amusement didn’t last long and soon, the same apathy that had been hanging over his imprisonment so far returned. He let his knees buckle beneath him, hissing as the pressure returned to his shoulders as the chains held him up by the arms. He was not given shoes with the clothes, though at least, he could keep his top now. But the slightly sore soles of his feet were cold on the rock down here. The warm spring air from upstairs didn’t reach down here, the prison keeping its damp cold as it had in the winter as well.

Lan SiZhui’s head was clearer than in the past few days while he had been slightly feverish following his latest rounds of punishment. However, he couldn’t really take advantage of this alert state, since there was nothing to think about. Soon, he committed himself to think about how far down he was, how high the sun had been outside, how much time had passed, was Jin Ling training now? Was Lan XiChen walking around above him, having tea with Jin GuangShan, politely exchanging insults?

Eventually though, he couldn’t help but return in thought to Lan XiChen’s words, to the punishment the others had to take for something that was his fault to begin with, and grief gripped his heart. In this place, where he was alone and in pain, he let himself cry for them.

# Reminiscence I.

*“Lan SiZhui.”* Lan SiZhui groaned, opening his eyes to the dark insides of his cell, disoriented. How much time has passed since Lan XiChen visited him? He didn’t know. The guards were down to feed him a couple of times, but he no longer trusted his judgement based on this.

*"Lan SiZhui."* He heard again and looked around, but nothing moved. He was alone, yet the voice was calling out to him so clearly.

“Who’s there?” He asked in a raspy voice, but no matter how hard he concentrated on the sounds around him, there was no movement. Was he truly going crazy?

*“Take revenge.”* The whispers said, and now that he paid attention, it sounded like someone was whispering right into his ear, but inside his head at the same time. He flinched away from the sound.

"No." Lan SiZhui hissed, closing his eyes.

*“Take revenge.”* The whispers repeated. Lan SiZhui squeezed his eyes even more, as if like this, he could shut the voice out. As if the voice wasn’t inside his head, taunting him. *“Lan SiZhui.”*

“Go away.” Lan SiZhui pleaded. “Leave me alone.”

*“Lan SiZhui.”* The voice kept repeating it, varying in pitch and volume. Lan SiZhui did his best to ignore it, to ignore how he felt resentful energy rise around him, the cold touch sending shivers down his spine, the tension pulling on mangled skin.



Lan SiZhui was in too much pain, the wounds on his back and chest hurting him even when he wasn't moving. Resentful energy settled in his cell like a cellmate to give him company. The nausea from both the pain and the continuous taunts inside his head as well as the resentful energy surrounding him, Lan SiZhui was feeling sick to his stomach. When the guards came to feed him, he felt like one sip of water and he would lose the little content his stomach had and refused.

“Eat.” Li Bing ordered, but Lan SiZhui kept his mouth firmly shut. Li Bing glared at him, then dropped the bowl, not caring that its contents spilled onto the floor. Lan SiZhui felt the lukewarm soup on his bare toes. Li Bing then turned and walked out. The other guard at the door hesitated.

“Shouldn’t we—” He began, but Li Bing ignored him, pushing the door closed, ignoring the other guard’s hand still holding it, just barely able to move it before the door was banged shut.

“If he doesn’t want to eat, so be it.” Li Bing said as the locks clicked shut. “For all I care, he could die down here.”

“Chief Li won’t be happy. Nor Sect Leader Jin. A-Bing, are you sure...”

“I can handle my brother.” Li Bing said as their voices along with their footsteps got further from Lan SiZhui’s cell. “What am I to do, force his mouth open and make him choke on it? Lou Xing had been whipped for taking revenge for his brother, yet here we are, feeding the monster who killed so many of our Sect. Why do you care, shouldn’t you also be mad?”

The other guard didn’t answer, just shuffled uncomfortably. With this, the outer door also banged shut. Lan SiZhui slumped down, sighing.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

In the end, Lan SiZhui gave in after the third skipped meal, gulping down soup like a lifeline. He was feeling sick, but at this point, he was so hungry, he couldn’t care anymore. By now, whispers were in his head even when people were around him. Li Bing glared at him the whole time he fed him.

“What, given up on your fast?” Li Bing asked once he was done. Lan SiZhui ignored this, also ignored the voices urging him to command them to take the man’s life, to let them enter his body, mangle his internal organs, to kill him—

Lan SiZhui felt his stomach turn.

“Thank you.” He said quietly. Li Bing glared some more, then took the tray with him and exited the cell.

♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪ | ♪♪ ♪

An unusual sound woke Lan SiZhui. He stirred, looking around, but his cell was just as dark and empty as it always had been. The voices were quiet now, letting him rest. He took advantage of this earlier, falling asleep quickly. Now he was awake and didn’t know why. He listened, hearing something shuffling outside his cell muffled.

This didn’t sound usual, like when the guards came and unlocked the outer door. Lan SiZhui tensed, hearing something metal hit the rock floor of the prison, then the outer door was pushed open. Lan SiZhui was familiar with this sound. There was hay on the floor outside as well, and whenever the door was opened, it dragged some along the floor, making a soft, but very distinctive noise. For a long beat, nothing moved, then a soft footstep sounded on the floor. After some hesitation, another had as well. The soft, muffled thuds of feet entered the prison area fully, then stopped.

After a few moments, the person got braver and came closer, only to stop. There was some shuffling of the feet, then footsteps again, stopping again, shuffling. Someone was looking inside the cells. Searching for something? Searching for him? Lan SiZhui held back his breath, listening to the person come closer, stopping at each cell. Who was down here? The



footsteps slowly reached the end of the corridor, where Lan SiZhui's cell was. There were shuffling footsteps and they were coming closer.

Lan SiZhui bowed his head, pretending to be asleep or something. He didn't know why. Whoever came here must've come for him. There was no point pretending, if they came to punish him again, they wouldn't care if he was awake or not. He still did. He watched the ground where the torch just outside his end was always lit and cast a strip of light right in front of Lan SiZhui's feet. Now he saw a shadow enter the strip of light. There was a harsh breath being sucked in by the person, then the shadow disappeared. There was some rustling of fabric, then a deep breath was drawn.

Lan SiZhui flinched as something hit the door – no, not the door. The door rattled, but the hit was aimed at the lock, for that also banged into the door with a loud sound. There was a sound of metal breaking, a soft cling as a piece fell to the floor. Then the lock rattled, soon another sound, heavier, but smaller piece of metal hitting the ground – the lock. It was then kicked away, the sound of metal sliding on stone soft. The person then took another deep breath and the door was yanked open.

The person didn't hesitate this time, with confident steps, like he had a right to be here and didn't just break in, like he had done this several times before, he walked over to Lan SiZhui, stopping a pace away, then there was something pressed under Lan SiZhui's chin, something wooden and long enough to reach him from where the person stood. It took Lan SiZhui a moment to realize it was not a hilt of a real sword, nor a wooden practice sword, but actually a Jin issued bow. The string was, however, more than familiar, since Lan SiZhui had examined it before with his own hands and have concluded they were indeed guqin strings.

Lan SiZhui raised his face as Huangfeng pressed to the underside of his chin. His eyes were wide as he faced the person in his cell. His memories must've tricked him, because he didn't expect the face looking back at him being so angular and mature. Perhaps because they saw each other so often before, he didn't realize Jin Ling was growing up now. Jin Ling frowned at him for a moment, shifting so the torchlight from outside shone more on Lan SiZhui's face, then his eyes widened a little and suddenly he didn't look so mature anymore, but like Lan SiZhui's old friend.

"It's you." Jin Ling said. Lan SiZhui licked his lips, nodding. Then, he asked:

"What are you doing here?" At this, Jin Ling glared at him angrily.

"I've come to free you and your first words to me are: 'what are you doing here'?! " Jin Ling scoffed, lowering his bow. Now that he saw him properly, Lan SiZhui saw he had regular Jin disciple clothes on, but was missing his sword. He had Huangfeng, but there was no quiver on his person nor at his hip, nor on his back. "So arrogant, Lan SiZhui."

Lan SiZhui frowned at him. "Jin Ling. I'm undergoing punishment. This is what the Sects sentenced me to; why are you here?"

"To rescue you!" Jin Ling said, as if this should be obvious. Lan SiZhui shook his head, not understanding.

“Why?” He asked again, emphasizing the phrase. Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed.

“Obviously, something happened.” He said, then looked over Lan SiZhui’s chains. “I don’t have time to explain. The prison officer is knocked out upstairs; who knows when will he be found or when he wakes. We should hurry.”

With this, he took a step back, then without warning, drew his bow, aimed at the chains, without an arrow in place. But this was Huangfeng, and as Jin Ling released the string, strong, yellow spiritual energy shot out as an arrow, severing the chain efficiently. This made Lan SiZhui list to the other side, since there was nothing holding him up on his side, and this caused his back to flare up in pain. Jin Ling didn’t seem to notice or care, turning to the other side and doing the same. However, like this, there was nothing holding Lan SiZhui up and he couldn’t get his legs under himself fast enough.

Lan SiZhui fell forward, turning slightly so his right shoulder, which was also aching from being suspended for so long, took the blunt of the fall. He cried out in pain, and Jin Ling swore, quickly rushing over.

“Shit!” Jin Ling crouched beside him, his hands hovering in the air, as if wanting to touch Lan SiZhui, but unsure if he should, and if he should, where should he. “Shit, sorry, did I hit you? I didn’t mean to!” Jin Ling swore, his eyes jumping from spot to spot, searching for a visible injury on Lan SiZhui.

“You didn’t.” Lan SiZhui gritted out through clenched teeth. There was a pause, and then Jin Ling made a questioning sound.

“Why did you fall then?!”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui said, his tone a little pleading. For Jin Ling to shut up, or for him to help, he didn’t know. There was a pause.

“Right. We don’t have time for this.” Jin Ling said, then he stood. “Ah,” he said suddenly as he drew his bow, “watch out.” He warned awkwardly. Lan SiZhui glared at him as Jin Ling released the string, the spiritual energy shattering the chain around Lan SiZhui’s ankles. Once this was done, he looked back at Lan SiZhui. For a moment, he said nothing, then he looked over at the chains before back at Lan SiZhui. “Uh, can you walk?” He asked uncertainly. Lan SiZhui swallowed bile and said:

“In a minute.” He wasn’t ready, the pain still present. He waited for a moment to breathe through it, closing his eyes. After a few moments of this, Jin Ling began to fidget.

“SiZhui.” Jin Ling said, impatient. Lan SiZhui sighed, knowing he was not going to have time to recover from the fall. He held out his hand and Jin Ling grasped it right away, helping him up, his other hand helping by Lan SiZhui’s other shoulder. The touch hurt, but he didn’t complain, standing on unsteady legs. He still wasn’t sure if he should escape. But he trusted Jin Ling. He knew the other wouldn’t come for him if he didn’t have a good reason. Well, that wasn’t quite true, Jin Ling would come from sheer boredom, but he was also mad at Lan SiZhui, and he thought the other might justify not coming for him earlier. Not that he wanted

him to. Their punishment was severe enough, their actions outrageous enough. Despite what the Sects thought, they were not evildoers.

Lan SiZhui's arm was pulled over Jin Ling's shoulder and he whined from the pain this caused him. At Jin Ling's questioning look, he shook his head – there was no point talking about it, since neither of them could do anything about the injuries. Jin Ling also held himself stiffly, and Lan SiZhui knew this had to be because of his own injuries, but the other ignored this as they headed out. Lan SiZhui's bare feet were sensitive on the hay and cold stone, but he ignored it in favor of concentrating on the goal of getting out.

They didn't talk on the way to the outer door. The fact there was no one waiting for them there was a good sign, maybe the prison officer was still undiscovered, unconscious. The climb up the stairs was even worse than when he had to endure for Lan XiChen's sake, since Lan SiZhui wasn't dragged up but had to walk on his own. Once they were near the sliding doors, Jin Ling paused, listening. When he heard no sound, they proceeded.

The office was once again transformed. The guest room appearance was gone, and the shelves full of documents were back. Jin Ling headed to the door, however, Lan SiZhui stopped, forcing the other to stop as well.

“What?” Jin Ling asked quietly.

“Clothes.” Lan SiZhui told him and Jin Ling looked over him, as if seeing for the first time that Lan SiZhui was in only undergarments, without boots as well. His face heated and he let go of Lan SiZhui, going over to the prison officer. “Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui hissed at him, but Jin Ling ignored it as he began to strip the guard. Lan SiZhui sighed, but let him do it, listening to anything outside, but the night was quiet – there were several lanterns lit in the office, the sun had set by now. Lan SiZhui had no idea how much time had passed again.

“Here.” Jin Ling came to his side and held out some simple, Jin issued outer robes. Lan SiZhui got into them without complaining, only when Jin Ling went to secure the sash around his waist did he protest.

“Wait, don't.”

“What?” Jin Ling frowned at him.

“The—” Lan SiZhui cut himself off, not telling Jin Ling his wounds would not be able to take the pressure. This was impossible, he couldn't go around in an unfastened robe. “Just very lightly, alright?”

“Fine.” Jin Ling looked at him strangely, but he was gentle as he circled Lan SiZhui's waist with the sash, securing it so loosely it practically just hung off his hips. Next Jin Ling helped Lan SiZhui into the boots, though the damp, warm boots felt gross on his bare feet, he didn't want the guards' socks as well. “You good now?” Jin Ling asked.

“Fine.” Lan SiZhui agreed.

“Let’s go then.” Jin Ling said, going over the door, leaving Lan SiZhui where he stood. He frowned and tried to walk on his own, but he could barely lift his feet. Jin Ling turned back to the shuffling sounds Lan SiZhui’s feet made on the ground. They quickly realized that Lan SiZhui couldn’t walk on his own yet. Despite Jin Ling’s questioning frown, he did not ask about this, but hurried back to him instead. He pulled Lan SiZhui’s arm over his shoulder once again, groaning from his own pain.

“Sorry.” Lan SiZhui muttered, but Jin Ling ignored him.

They went over to the door and Jin Ling let go of him in favor of opening it a crack, looking around outside. “The guards should be busy with the banquet, if we’re lucky, we won’t run into any.” He said, then opened the door more and picked up his friend again. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” Lan SiZhui asked, instead of asking what banquet was being held. It didn’t matter now.

“To the Cloud Recesses.”

“What?” Lan SiZhui hissed as they stepped outside. “Why?”

“Not now.” Jin Ling said tersely, leading him towards the main buildings. From here, they could see them, how the main buildings were lit up from whatever occasion took place now. Jin Ling and him were quick to make their way that way, although Lan SiZhui slowed the other down significantly, Jin Ling didn’t complain once. Whenever they heard voices, Jin Ling nudged him towards some buildings, hiding behind them, avoiding people.

They got lucky, whatever was going on took precedence to people wandering around, only the occasional servant passing by and on one occasion an apparently significantly drunk pair searching for a quiet nook to have an affair. They avoided them successfully, only having to begin hiding in earnest once they neared the guest rooms.

“Fuck.” Jin Ling cursed softly under his breath as they saw a large group sitting in the middle of the courtyard, drinking and conversing loudly.

“Is there another way?” Lan SiZhui asked. Jin Ling thought, then grunted and directed Lan SiZhui back where they came from. They went around a bigger group of buildings Lan SiZhui didn’t know the function of, but from the sounds, smells and occasional sight of servants, he suspected these were the kitchens. They went this way for a while, then a tall wall obscured their path. Jin Ling glanced over at him.

“This is the main family’s quarters. There should be lax security and nobody here while the banquet is going on.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed, eying the wall. They were supposed to go over that, weren’t they?

“Jin ZiXuan should’ve really given me his sword instead.” Jin Ling complained, though his grip on Huangfeng tightened. Lan SiZhui didn’t understand what Jin ZiXuan had to do with this all, but he didn’t ask. “I’ll help you. Come on.” Jin Ling pulled him closer and Lan

SiZhui gritted his teeth, holding in his painful cry by sheer will, as Jin Ling leapt over the wall, holding onto Lan SiZhui tightly. As soon as they landed on the other side, Lan SiZhui pushed Jin Ling away and stumbled over to a bush to throw up into. “Fuck.” Jin Ling swore quietly. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Lan SiZhui said, once he could talk. Now his already empty and aching stomach was even emptier and achier. Once he could breathe from the pain, he looked around. They were in some gardens. Jin Ling, sensing he could move again, pulled his arm over his shoulder.

“Come on, we should be quick. It’s a matter of time they discover the break-out.” Jin Ling said, guiding him through the gardens. There were no guards posting here, and they proceeded forward. Lan SiZhui had never been to the family’s quarters of the Jin Sect’s residence. These buildings were airy with plenty of gardens around, the scenery nice and romantic. There were hardly any guards, only one patrolling around whom they expertly avoided.

However, not long after, they arrived to some other gardens, these ones not separated from the rest of the Koi tower by a wall, instead, they were overlooking Lanling’s rooftops. Lan SiZhui was sure in the daylight this was a beautiful sight – even at night, the little lights of the city Koi Tower towered over offered a sight worthy to die for. As they proceeded, the scene also became somewhat familiar – Lan SiZhui realized these had to be the gardens behind the reception hall. As they neared this place as well, they heard more noise than before.

Someone in the distance in a building was playing music, people laughing and conversing loudly, a joyous occasion taking place in the Jin Sect’s reception area. However, as they got closer, they also noticed several people walking around the gardens, admiring its beauty and to get away from others. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui had to hide on more than one occasion, to avoid being seen.

They were trying to evade coming across a giggling couple when they arrived to a quieter part of the gardens. Here, only one person stood, gazing at some peony bushes which were just budding, not ready yet to bloom.

The person standing there was wearing a beautiful red outfit. The style was of the usual Jin Sect robes, however, there was a sheer outer robe on him as well. The outer robe was embroidered with golden thread, the motif of peonies stitched into the fabric carefully. His other robes were slightly more simple, though they also had a floral pattern embroidered into them with golden and red thread. His hair was also carefully made, secured into a half-bun, his ornament tall and resembling flowers blooming, also golden. There were silk and gold threads also threaded into his hair, mother of pearl secured into them.

Before Lan SiZhui could even take this all in, however, suddenly, there was a shadow moving toward the man, and Jin Ling moved away from him. The shadow was wearing dark robes, a sharp contrast against the elaborate wedding gown the other man was wearing, in his hand a long dagger, his face masked by a familiar mask. It was the mask of an exorcist, simplistic, yet gnarly looking. Lan SiZhui had seen this mask before.

However, the person was moving towards the groom, his dagger ready to strike. Before he could reach the other, Jin Ling moved forward, drawing his bow and sending a wave of yellow spiritual power against the masked figure. The man fell, his back hitting the ground hard as he clutched at his chest, no doubt the same spiritual energy that shattered Lan SiZhui's restraints doing a lot of damage to this person as well.

"Su MinShan, assassinating Jin ZiXuan on his wedding celebration, is Jin GuangYao truly this shameless?!" Jin Ling snarled. Jin ZiXuan also turned hearing the commotion behind him, drawing Suihua from his scabbard. Lan SiZhui didn't even notice him carrying it, though in those obnoxious clothes, he would've been able to hide a guqin and nobody would notice.

"Jin GuangYao?" Jin ZiXuan murmured, looking at the masked figure with a frown. "Did he really send you?" He asked.

When the person didn't answer, Jin Ling drew his bow again, threateningly. The masked man looked between the two Jin towering over him. Then he slowly reached for his weapon, however, Jin ZiXuan noticed it in time and sent Suihua towards his attacker. Jin Ling's eyes widened and he turned his bow towards the sword.

"Wait!" He called out, shooting at the sword, misdirected Suihua's projectile, making the sword fall onto the stone pathway with a hollow sound.

"MouShi!" Jin ZiXuan called out, scandalized. However, before they could argue, the masked person pulled his dagger out, jumping on his feet and heading towards Jin Ling. Seeing this, Lan SiZhui was gripped by panic. He could hardly be of any help, but... He licked his lips, pursing them and whistling sharply. Resentful energy rose suddenly, strongly around the masked person, making him jump back in fear, dropping his dagger. Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan turned towards Lan SiZhui briefly, but he was glaring at the masked figure.

"Don't kill him!" Jin Ling called over, his tone annoyed. "He is the only one who can prove this was Jin GuangYao's doing!"

"I know." Lan SiZhui barked back, equally annoyed.

"How is this proof?" Jin ZiXuan asked, glaring at Jin Ling. "A-Yao is in the reception hall with everyone else."

"Yes, but where is Clan Leader Su?" Jin Ling asked, glaring back.

Before they could continue their fight, voices rose in the near distance, a response to the expressions of spiritual energy in the gardens just now. All of them turned that way, then the masked person suddenly moved, pulling a talisman from inside his robes.

"Transportation talisman!" Lan SiZhui warned them. Jin Ling turned, drawing his bow again, however, this time he was too slow. Just as he shot, the person activated the talisman. With a flicker of spiritual energy, he was gone.

“Fuck!” Jin Ling swore. He whirled on Jin ZiXuan. “What were you doing here alone, making yourself a target?!”

“I wasn’t aware dangerous criminals and assassins would be in the Jin Sect’s private gardens!” Jin ZiXuan told him. “What is he doing out?!” He asked, pointing towards Lan SiZhui.

“Isn’t it obvious?!” Jin Ling glared. “Wasn’t that why you told me about Jin GuangShan’s plans?!”

“On my wedding celebration, Jin Ling?!” Jin ZiXuan glared back.

“Everyone was distracted!” Jin Ling said. “If you weren’t here just now, we would be gone by now.”

“What are you waiting for then?!” Jin ZiXuan exclaimed, annoyed. “Go! They are upon us.”

“Ch!” Jin Ling scoffed, hurrying over to Lan SiZhui. Before they took off, Jin Ling turned back to Jin ZiXuan. “This person was just now hit by my Huangfeng. He is injured. If you see Clan Leader Su, you should ask him about it.”

“Jin Ling.” Jin ZiXuan glared at him. The voices grew closer. Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“Just look into it. You’ll have found out the truth then.”

“Just go.” Jin ZiXuan told them.

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui told him. Jin ZiXuan looked at him briefly, then turned towards where people were hurrying over to see what happened. Jin Ling glared at his father for a moment longer, annoyed, then looked over at the arriving people. He then took hold of Lan SiZhui tighter, Lan SiZhui grunting in pain as Jin Ling leaped up and over the people, several calling out in recognition.

“It’s MouShi!”

“Is that ChunYu-Jun he carries?!”

“Did they just make an attempt on Young Master Jin’s life?!”

“Catch them!”

Jin Ling swore under his breath as they got on the people’s other side, then they took off running. Lan SiZhui tried his best to ignore the pain that flared up all over his body, his back sending wave after wave of excruciating pain down his spine. He gritted his teeth and blinked the tears out of his eyes as Jin Ling dragged him towards the reception hall. By now guards showed up there as well.

Jin Ling let go of Lan SiZhui’s hand, drawing his bow while still running, shooting spiritual energy between the guards. While the guards recovered, the two prisoners ran past them, towards the side of the building. Startled shouts came from inside the reception hall and soon

guards showed up before them again, coming from the front entrance of the reception hall. Jin Ling knocked them out as well, reaching back to take hold of Lan SiZhui's wrist, leaping over the fallen bodies.

They arrived in front of the reception hall, to the top of the famous stairs leading into the Koi Tower, only to find themselves facing a group of guards, Li XingXu in the lead. Before they could engage in battle, several people hurried out of the reception hall, calling out.

"MouShi, what is the meaning of this?!" demanded Jin GuangShan.

"SiZhui, is that you?!" Wei WuXian pushed into the front of the group. His presence surprised Lan SiZhui. Half a year couldn't have passed for his seclusion to end, so his presence was unexpected. Though if this really was Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi's wedding banquet, Lan SiZhui suspected the other was allowed this. He was wearing dark blue robes with black underrobes, different than his usual attire of dark purple and red or black and red. He looked like he was part of the Jiang Sect.

Soon, two other people showed up. Lan XiChen was wearing dark blue robes as well, though in style they were different than Wei WuXian's and also had the cloud motif embroidered into them. He complimented Nie MingJue's looks, who stood next to him in also different than usual robes, having shed the military style robes and now wearing similar style as Lan XiChen, only his were grey with green undertones.

From the side, Jin GuangYao showed up also, wearing elegant robes, also darker than the Jin Sect's preferred style, though the occasion preferred the darker colors. In contrast, Jin Ling's light golden disciple robes and Lan SiZhui's pale guard robes were like mourning robes.

"ChunYu-Jun has escaped." Jin GuangYao cried, then turned to Li XingXu. "Chief, arrest them!"

On their other side, Li XingXu took a step towards them, but suddenly, Jin Ling summoned something from his sleeve. Lan SiZhui looked over, seeing an arrow in his hand, which he quickly notched and drew the bow, aiming it at Jin GuangShan.

"Stop!" He ordered. "Or I'll shoot Sect Leader Jin!"

"MouShi!" Several people cried in surprise. However, the loudest voice had to be Jiang Cheng's, who just showed up with his mother on his side. They, too, were wearing dark purple robes. Zidian was sparkling on Madam Yu's finger.

"We will be leaving now." Jin Ling said in a strong voice and stared to back away. Lan SiZhui followed him, looking over at Li XingXu, who was still clutching his sword strongly, glaring at Lan SiZhui.

Seeing the man, Lan SiZhui suddenly had an idea. This would just further confirm their fears of ChunYu-Jun, however, weren't they already looking at him as their enemy, who should be punished so severely, he could barely walk now? Lan SiZhui pursed his lips, whistling a soft tune. Jin Ling next to him flinched, but otherwise his aim and gaze remained fixed on the gentries in front of him. At his back, however, Lan SiZhui could see Li XingXu's eyes widen



in fear as he looked around. Hoping this would prompt the man to move, Lan SiZhui whistled a sharper tone. Indeed, his plan worked, and Li XingXu gestured his men, slowly parting for the approaching Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling.

“Jin Ling.” He said softly, touching the other’s shoulder lightly. Jin Ling seemed to understand the unsaid warning though, and easing the bow down, grabbed Lan SiZhui, turning and leaping up, down the stairs. They landed a little harsher than previously, Jin Ling having spent his spiritual energy excessively. Once there, they heard calls of alarm from the Koi Tower.

“They’re escaping!”

“After them!”

“Catch them!”

Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look, then Jin Ling grabbed Lan SiZhui’s wrist, beginning to drag him away, in a direction he seemed confident in. Lan SiZhui let him, even though he stumbled more than ran after his friend, the extortion of the last couple of minutes exhausting him, the pain consuming his thoughts.



Lan SiZhui didn’t really remember where they’d escaped after the Koi Tower. They ran through streets then bamboo forests, the night air chilly, but he felt nothing of it. He was sore and sweating, the world swirling around him. It was probably hours later that he prompted Jin Ling for them to stop, unable to push through it anymore.

“We will stop once we reach Jinhua.” Jin Ling told him.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui grunted, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth. Jin Ling looked at him for a long moment, then huffed.

“Fine.” He said. “I’ll look for somewhere to spend the night. Stay here.” He ordered, then disappeared. Lan SiZhui leaned against a tree, breathing deep and even, hoping the pain would ease. Soon, Jin Ling reappeared. “I wasn’t planning on camping.” He said, then grumbled: “Wasn’t really thinking of the aftermath of our escape.” He said, going over to Lan SiZhui. “Come on, I found a spot.” He didn’t wait for Lan SiZhui’s answer, pulling his arm over his shoulder, supporting him as they headed between the trees.

They settled on the shore of a small lake. Jin Ling next disappeared, returning with a handful of twigs, dumping them by Lan SiZhui’s feet, who was sitting on a rock, unable to find a comfortable position to sit in. Once the twigs were in a pile, Jin Ling paused, frowning down at it.

“You don’t have any flame sticks?” Lan SiZhui asked. Jin Ling looked over at him, then pulled a qiankun pouch from his sleeve. He looked through the contents, making a sound of victory when he found it, crouching to light the sticks directly. Lan SiZhui hissed, and Jin Ling looked over, questioning. “Here.” Lan SiZhui reached down and tore out a rather dry

patch of grass from the base of the rock. Jin Ling looked at him in confusion. Lan SiZhui sighed. "If you light the sticks directly, the flame might go out before the whole stack catches on fire. Light this first, then put it under the stack."

Jin Ling made an annoyed face, then did as told, his brows furrowed in concentration. Lan SiZhui watched as the fire was properly lit. Jin Ling seemed satisfied with his work. Once the small fire was going confidently, he went over and sat next to Lan SiZhui, on a different rock. He looked over at Lan SiZhui with a frown.

"So, what's wrong with you?"

"Hm?" Lan SiZhui asked, delaying answering the question, looking into the flames.

"You threw up from me carrying you over that wall. What did they do?" Lan SiZhui sighed, looking back over at his friend.

"Why did we escape?" He asked instead. Jin Ling's frown deepened, then he looked over at the fire.

"We should sleep first."

"Jin Ling." Lan SiZhui said chiding, wanting to know at least why they fled like this.

"We will talk in the morning, I said." Jin Ling glared at him. "This is a long story and we're both tired." Lan SiZhui considered pushing, but he was indeed exhausted. He agreed quietly, but neither moved to lie down, both looking into the flames. Lan SiZhui's back was sore and even the burn on his chest ached.

"Do you think your father is safe?" Lan SiZhui asked quietly.

"I've warned him about the danger. If he isn't stupid, he will be fine." Jin Ling said, standing and going over to a spot next to the small fire. He kicked at the dirt, then laid down, his back to the fire and Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui suspected despite this, Jin Ling was still anxious about the safety of his parents. His shoulders were tense as he laid there, and Lan SiZhui had no illusions that his friend was glaring into the night instead of sleeping. However, no matter how much he wanted to, Lan SiZhui had no words to ease his friend's worries. They were, after all, valid.

"If you didn't break me out, you could've stayed by his side to protect him." Lan SiZhui remarked quietly. He knew this would just agitate Jin Ling's temper but couldn't help himself, saying the words softly. "Whatever the reason you broke me out, it couldn't have been more important than that."

"Just because you're following in your YiLing Patriarch's footsteps and willing to kill thousands for irrelevant people, I'm not like you." Jin Ling said, though it was not the passionate fighting he usually did, still lying on the ground, his voice strong and his posture rigid. "Besides, Jin GuangYao needs to be stopped through proof of his misgivings. Once he is proved to have made an attempt like this, then he will be properly stopped. There's no point sitting by Jin ZiXuan and killing every assassin he sends his way."

Lan SiZhui considered his words. Jin Ling was right. Jin GuangYao was too crafty for them to stop him any other way. He sighed.

“Alright.” He said. “What is the plan then?”

“We will converse tomorrow.” Jin Ling said curtly. Lan SiZhui suspected this meant he had none at the moment and nodded in understanding, despite the other unable to see him. He agreed quietly and they fell silent once again.

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Lan SiZhui didn't remember falling asleep, but the next day, or maybe just hours later, he was awake again. The sky was still dark, though there was a light glow to it, indicating the sun was about to rise. Lan SiZhui sat up from where he had fallen asleep. He was still sitting on the rock, beside which stood a thin tree. Lan SiZhui had been leaning against its trunk, although it was no thicker than his thigh.

Jin Ling was still on the ground, in the same position he had been last night, his back to Lan SiZhui and the small pile that had been their campfire. It had long gone out by now. Lan SiZhui flexed the muscles in his back, but immediately regretted the action as sharp pain traveled down his spine. Lan SiZhui breathed through the pain and waited for it to pass. Once it had, all he had to occupy himself with was wait for Jin Ling to wake. He was not going to wake him, Jin Ling needed the rest after he used so much spiritual energy to get them out of Koi Tower.

It was surprising that the Jin Sect still hadn't caught up, but maybe they gave up the pursuit in fear of another assassination attempt. Or maybe they decided to regroup first and look for them later. Or maybe they weren't far now, and it was only the matter of time to catch them.

Lan SiZhui waited and waited, but after a while, he grew tired of doing nothing. In the prison, he also just did nothing, and he had enough of this. He considered hunting for breakfast, but his sore back wouldn't let him sneak around. Then, he considered the lake. He knew this water wasn't good on his injuries, would just infect them.

However, the lure of a proper bath was almost impossible to resist. Lan SiZhui reached up and gathered his hair. It had never been washed since he was imprisoned. There were chunks of dried blood in it as well as crusty sweat and ointment where the ends touched his treated injuries. Lan SiZhui sighed, tossing it back over his shoulder. There was no use washing it. Even if he left the undergarments on, the water would seep through, possibly even gluing his clothes to his wounds.

Cloud Recesses' cold lakes were coming from the mountains, where strong positive energy surged, and so together the porous rocks and the positive energy made it safe to submerge even open wounds. This lake was a rural one in the middle of the forest. There was no way it was safe.

“You're watching that lake like it's your long lost lover.” He heard Jin Ling's scratchy voice. He looked over, seeing the other had sat up. Lan SiZhui shrugged as much as his sore back allowed.

“I need a bath.”

“So, bathe.” Jin Ling grumbled, climbing on his feet and stretching with a grunt, feeling his waist and hips with his hands, clearly sore from having slept on the hard ground. Lan SiZhui wondered if Jin Ling’s discipline whip wound was hurting him. He looked over his friend’s back, but thankfully saw no sign of his wound having bled.

“The water isn’t clear.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, answering after a short delay. Jin Ling shrugged.

“Suit yourself. You Lan and always being clean, I really don’t know how you do it.” He complained light-heartedly.

“Our robes are treated with an oil that mostly repels dirt and water. We’re also taught as children how to move to avoid it.” Lan SiZhui said. “There are also several low-level talismans woven into them. One to keep us dry, but that only works with a small amount of water. One to keep our clothes clean, also only for small amount of dirt.”

“So, the Lan are cheating.” Jin Ling threw him a flat look. “Yet you manage to convince the rest of the world you’re otherworldly creatures who are just too good to get dirty.”

“We night-hunt in light-colored robes.” Lan SiZhui shrugged. “Our ancestors figured there would be no point for them if they got dirty all the time.”

“So, it’s not just because it’s in the rules to not get dirty?” Jin Ling asked skeptically. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“When I was struggling with rules, Hanguang-Jun would explain why we had them, in order for me to remember them.” He paused. “Not everyone got this treatment. Several times I had to straighten disciples breaking rules, only for them to complain they didn’t understand why they had to obey them. When I explained, they looked like this finally made sense to them.”

“There’s a reason behind not allowed to breath loudly?” Jin Ling challenged.

“The Lan live like monks, we also meditate like monks.” He hesitated, knowing Jin Ling was going to mock the Sect for it, but still said: “Hanguang-Jun said he once read in a history book one of the founders of the Lan Sect was annoyed by how his disciple mate always huffing his breath while meditating and made this rule.”

Jin Ling looked at him with wide eyes before snorting an ugly sound, covering his mouth immediately. “Your Sect is fucking ridiculous, Lan SiZhui.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed light-heartedly, with a small smile playing on his lips. It was good that humor returned between them, even just for a small while. After the amusement died down, Jin Ling went over and sat on the rock he had the previous night, his pose stiff, hands on his knees, looking straight ahead.

“Last night, you asked about the reason why I broke you out.” He said after an awkward pause, haltingly. Lan SiZhui nodded, turning to him to pay attention. Jin Ling hesitated, then

began. His story went like this:

After the prison's doors closed behind him, Jin Ling was given new clothes, and led to the cells. There was, as Li XingXu earlier said, two other people there as well, one of them a cultivator, the other not. Jin Ling was put into one of the cells; it was different than the one Lan SiZhui was held in. Firstly, there was no solid door, nor chains, there were bars separating the cells from the hallway. There was also an uncomfortable straw bed. Secondly, this building was not underground, though the walls were made of heavy stone, but there was also a slit of window left for every cell.

"This is barbaric!" Jin Ling complained. "You can't keep people like this!"

The guards didn't pay him any attention as they locked him up, then left him there. Jin Ling was upset because of this, but eventually, settled in this cell. They gave him food every day, though only two meals a day, and it was not the best. The first time he complained about it, one of his prison mates, a woman who looked like a rouge criminal told him to shut up. Jin Ling instantly didn't like her.

He was kept there for a week. On the seventh day, however, the guards came to him, with Li XingXu in the back, watching as Jin Ling was chained and brought out.

"Where are you taking me?!" Jin Ling demanded. "Where is SiZhui?!"

However, the guards didn't answer him.

"Take him." Li XingXu ordered, then led them outside. They then proceeded to go to the main courtyard, where Jin GuangShan, Jin GuangYao and some other people waited, one holding the discipline board of the Jin Sect. Jin Ling had only seen it being used on others and had never had it used on him. He eyed the scene suspiciously.

"MouShi." Jin GuangShan greeted him and Jin Ling glared at him and his son.

"Sect Leader Jin. You owe me an explanation! Lan SiZhui and I were to be taken to the prisons, yet I was taken there while Lan SiZhui was taken somewhere else. Sect Leader Jin, explain yourself!" Jin Ling demanded. Jin GuangShan looked annoyed at this, but didn't take much offense.

"Jin Ling, this is your punishment now. Don't concern yourself with irrelevant matters."

"How could this be irrelevant?!" Jin Ling glowered. "Sect Leader Lan let you have SiZhui in good faith, that you would not treat him unfairly, even though I warned them about this. Yet you're so shameless, you even go against this and take him away!"

"Such insolence from you, Jin Ling, I really don't know how you became like this." Jin GuangShan shook his head as a disappointed grandfather. "I've celebrated you as a hero of the Sunshot Campaign, acknowledged your efforts and even let you cling to ZiXuan's thighs,

yet you betrayed my good will so much and speak to me as if I'm below you. How should I take this?"

"Sect Leader Jin, do you really think I care about your opinion of me?!" Jin Ling shot back. "I don't answer you." This made sense in Jin Ling's mind, since he was from the future, naturally, Jin GuangShan was long dead by the time he grew up. Initially he respected the other as his ancestor, that's why he didn't make a big deal out of this, but after hearing stories from his maternal uncle in the future and also experiencing the man's personality this time as well, he had to realize he really was a shady person. Seeing this, he refused to treat this person with respect, even though he knew as his ancestor, this was unbecoming.

"Jin Ling, since you're a Jin Sect disciple, how could you not answer to me?" Jin GuangShan asked him. "Enough of this nonsense. Your punishment had been decided; now take it and you shall be forgiven."

"Alright." Jin Ling said. "What is it?" Jin Ling wanted to hear the sentence, so he asked this.

"MouShi." Jin GuangYao stepped forward and Jin Ling was dissatisfied; since this person was his uncle in the future, he knew his personality. Jin GuangYao didn't believe in punishing a person physically, so in the future, Jin Ling never had to face a scene like this. Being handled like a lowly criminal like this by his own uncle, whom in the future coddled him; this was really uncomfortable. "Sect Leader Jin had decided your punishment. You are to receive five hundred strikes with the board, a strike with the discipline whip as well as a month of seclusion."

At this, Jin Ling became horrified. Five hundred strikes?! And the discipline whip also?! This was ridiculous, even in the strict and inhuman Cloud Recesses he had only received fifty and he already felt like he was dying! Would he even survive five hundred strikes and the discipline whip as well?! Was there a human on earth who could?! Did they want him to be disabled for the rest of his life?!

"No way!" He protested. "Is that your plan?! Kill me with the punishment, file it away as an accident?! Give me my sword then; I'll gut myself here and now instead!"

"Jin Ling, there's no need for such dramatics." Jin GuangShan placated him. "Naturally, your Golden Core is quite strong. If I didn't think you could take it, I wouldn't have ruled this."

"Who cares what you think?! Nobody could take it! Not even those stuffy Lan!" He protested.

"Jin Ling, this is your punishment." Jin GuangShan told him. "It cannot be helped. Just take it."

Jin Ling glared some more, but seeing Jin GuangShan was not going to change his mind, he steeled his heart and his spine, lifting his chin; if he was going to die from this, at least he was going to die with his head held high, as is expected from a Sect Leader.

"Alright, fine. I'll take it. After all, fifty strikes are nothing to the Lan. I'm sure this would be nothing to them as well, so be it." He added with a bravado he didn't necessarily feel, but

didn't back down. Internally he was truly worried. Just like Lan SiZhui, he also didn't have many experience with the discipline whip. He heard old stories about people receiving it and also knew his maternal uncle used it if necessary. Unlike Lan SiZhui, he never saw anyone affected by it before, but from the stories, he knew this could kill him even.

Jin GuangYao then motioned and the disciple at Jin Ling's back landed the first strike with the board. Since Jin Ling had experienced this before, he took it with grace. It was also true that the Jin Sect's boards were a little more lightweight than the Lan Sect's. After fifty, he felt like he was unnecessarily scared, back in the Cloud Recesses, when he received his first physical punishment.

However, the disciple didn't stop at fifty, and at hundred, Jin Ling felt like he couldn't take anymore. However, he kept on kneeling there and taking it, doing his best to stay upright. However, after two hundred, this was impossible and he couldn't help but cry out, wanting to get away; he didn't, since he would be arrested by the guards standing to the side immediately.

At three hundred, he almost threw up. He felt that if he was gutted and left to bleed out, even then he wouldn't be in such pain. Even if the Jade Emperor put a mountain on his back, he could bear it better than this. At four hundred, he began seeing black spots in front of his eyes, which had been shedding tears for who knows how long by then. Jin Ling wasn't sure he was conscious for all five hundred strikes he received.

After a while, his punishment with the board ended. He was so hurt, he could hardly breathe, but the Jin Sect Leader's heart didn't bleed for him; instead, he watched without emotions as the disciples prepared the discipline whip. Jin GuangYao said something else then, but Jin Ling couldn't really pay attention. The strike with the whip hurt, but it was not so bad. Jin Ling felt like after five hundred strikes with the board, he could easily take it. Then, Jin GuangYao said:

"MouShi, your punishment had been delivered. Now spend a month in seclusion, the grace of Sect Leader Jin not allowing for more, even though your peers received harsher punishment than this. Take him." This last sentence was directed to the guards. Jin Ling was pulled up from his kneeling position, but as soon as he was pulled onto his feet, Jin Ling felt the blood leaving his head and he passed out.

When he woke up, he was no longer in the courtyard, but in a room instead. Looking around, Jin Ling could tell right away this was one of the rooms at the back of the disciple quarters of the Koi Tower, where disciples went to cultivate in seclusion. His back was so sore, he was sure it was broken or something. He could barely move to sit up, but he had to, because even though he was in so much pain, he was so thirsty, he couldn't not drink. Reaching out he saw he was shirtless and also saw something dark on the back of his arm. Looking over his shoulder, hoping to see his back, Jin Ling saw it was not only on his arm but his entire back was dancing in different shades of purple. In the middle of this, there was one sharp line, received from the discipline whip; thankfully, the wound was not deep and didn't break the skin all the way, only in the beginning of it.

He felt sick from this and drank quickly before lying back down, onto his front, groaning in pain. For a few days, he could hardly move. There was a nurse coming by at the end of the

first week, taking a look at his back and noting his injuries were healing nicely. Jin Ling got three meals a day this time, although he had to eat it hanging off his bed on his front, because sitting up hurt as well.

His Golden Core was indeed helping the healing process, but it still took long for it to heal properly. While he recuperated in the seclusion room, he had not much to do but wonder how his friends were faring. Even though he was still mad at Lan SiZhui, he was also worried that he hasn't heard anything about him for a while now.

Then, a few days later, he received a guest he did not expect to greet. There was a knock on the door, though there was no real point to it, since Jin Ling had discovered the first time he could stand and walk around a few days earlier, that the door was locked shut from the outside.

The door now opened, and Jin GuangYao entered, with Li XingXu at his back.

"MouShi." Jin GuangYao bowed to him. Jin Ling didn't respond, so Jin GuangYao turned away from him for a moment. "Please, wait outside." Jin GuangYao told Li XingXu, who hesitated, then bowed and stepped out, closing the door behind himself. Once he was gone, Jin GuangYao turned back to Jin Ling and smiled at him. "Excuse me for the intrusion. You still have some time left of your punishment, but I felt I couldn't wait more." He stopped, then gestured at the low table in the middle of the room. "May I?"

Jin Ling scoffed at him, then as the other sat, he also stood from the bed stiffly, going over and sitting on the other side of the table. Being face-to-face with the man for the first time since they've arrived to the past was strange for him. Jin Ling in the future was not used to this. He had always been at ease with his paternal uncle. The man practically raised him, so Jin Ling thought he knew him well. However, this time around he had no idea about the other's temperament, and also, this time he knew the truth about the other man and viewed him with suspicion and contempt.

"Jin Ling, may I ask how you're doing?" Jin GuangYao asked as he poured them both tea. Jin Ling was annoyed that Jin GuangYao used his name, but he supposed it would be worse if he called him 'A-Ling'. "Ah, five hundred strikes with the board and one with the discipline whip, it is unusual. You must be an exceptional cultivator to have recovered so fast from it."

"Yes." Jin Ling snapped in the end, his patience for his uncle's usual nonsense running out quickly, both from the pain of the received punishment and because this was the first time he was alone with the man he thought fondly of for all his life. "What do you want?"

"Jin Ling, you're direct." Jin GuangYao smiled at him shyly. Jin Ling knew this smile, it was one he reserved for uncomfortable diplomatic matters. He glared at Jin GuangYao some more. "In turn, I must be direct as well." He paused, then continued: "Five hundred strikes and the discipline whip is indeed rather harsh. I'm sorry you have had to endure this in the name of appearing just in the eye of the cultivation world. You must know Sect Leader Jin was not happy to have to sentence such harsh punishment for you, but it couldn't be helped. He cannot show favor, unless we want others to ask uncomfortable questions."

"Such as?" Jin Ling asked, wanting to know what Jin GuangYao meant.



“Ah, Jin Ling, there’s no need to be so upset.” Jin GuangYao placated. “After all, we’re family.”

In the following silence, Jin Ling thought hard about this. It was either because of what was said in Nightless City, that Jin Ling’s relation to the Jin family was revealed, or because Jin GuangYao truly knew where they came from and was done hiding his weapons in his sleeve, putting this information out to play strategies. In the end, Jin Ling just waited for the other to elaborate, but confirming anything.

“You must’ve realized by now, when we were in Nightless City at the end of the Sunshot Campaign, I was also in the throne room along with Wen RuoHan and ChunYu-Jun. The things they’ve talked about were unfamiliar.”

Jin Ling thought about this for a long moment again. Surely, Jin GuangYao by now knew their secret. There was no point hiding it. Jin GuangYao truly said what he said to reveal this. However, the question still remained:

“So, you know. Big deal.” Jin Ling told him. “My question hasn’t changed. What do you want?” Hoping that Jin GuangYao’s strategy depended on Jin Ling being upset about him knowing of the future, he hoped with nonchalance he could throw the other off and eliminate the threat Jin GuangYao tried to put on him.

“Naturally, knowing this, it is rather upsetting.” Jin GuangYao said. “Since then, I’ve worked it out. You’re very close to ZiXuan and also have strong emotions about his marriage with Lady Jiang. I assume I am correct in my theory that they are your parents.” He paused, waiting for confirmation, but he received none. Jin Ling remained cool-headed and waited the other out. Since coming to the past, Jin Ling learned that in strategic situations quiet aloofness was effective.

“Since that is the case, this makes you my nephew and Sect Leader Jin’s grandson. This is indeed a very joyous thing. To know that the future of our Sects rests in such capable hands as one of the Six Heroes of the Sunshot Campaign, not even mentioning MouShi himself, who killed the Wen Sect’s youngest son, Wen Chao, and also helped free the Lotus Pier and managed to become a tactician during the war, the Jin Sect is proud.”

To this, Jin Ling would’ve liked to tell Jin GuangYao exactly how much he cares about the Jin Sect’s ancestry line right now, he continued to remain silent, holding himself back from saying something, in fear of being caught emotional. Jin GuangYao continued:

“However, this also raises the question what such a brilliant young Sect heir is doing here. Surely, you being here can be nothing short of an accident. For you to go missing in your own time, it has to be unacceptable, so this travel must not have been intentional. However, we are grateful that even if this is the case, MouShi decided to help us out instead of being selfish and going home. However, war is over and MouShi must be terribly missed by those who await him at home.

“However, seeing the current situation, this is very difficult.” Jin GuangYao shook his head, as if terribly troubled by this. “Jin Ling, you became such a hero, then later, ChunYu-Jun dragged you into his dangerous plot. Because of this, the people of the cultivation world are

condemning you the same fate as ChunYu-Jun deserves for his crimes. Because of this, as much as Sect Leader Jin would like to let you go, I'm afraid we cannot afford it. However, Sect Leader Jin is generous and wants to get you back to where you truthfully belong."

This time Jin Ling was unable to hold himself back, feeling wronged by the Jin Sect Leader personally, and so he snapped: "Does he?!" He even slammed his hand on the table, which made Jin GuangYao retreat a little. "Jin GuangYao, I care not for what Jin GuangShan wants. This is none of any of your businesses. Stay out of it!"

"Ah, but Jin Ling, how could we? Sect Leader Jin sees you as family."

"Just tell me what you want." Jin Ling demanded. As if they had the right to treat him as family, especially after what they sentenced him as punishment, after what Jin GuangYao did to him in Guanyin temple...! These men... They truly thought too much of themselves.

"Of course, since this is the case, Sect Leader Jin requested me to look after this matter. Jin Ling, since I know you've first arrived to the GusuLan guest lectures, I have a suspicion that is where this accident came to happen. I have worked with Sect Leader Lan in the past and managed a good relationship with him. I would be happy to take it upon myself to investigate this matter. I would not dare to share this knowledge with Sect Leader Lan, since this is sensitive knowledge, and it is best if not many people know of it. However, the GusuLan Sect has the most elaborate library in the cultivation world. Since this accident happened in the Cloud Recesses and also there is so much knowledge about obscure things, I should go there and investigate."

Once again Jin Ling couldn't hold himself back and said the very thing that crossed him mind just then: "As if I need help from a murderer and a rapist!" Jin Ling snapped again, hitting the table once more. At this, Jin GuangYao's eyes widened in what Jin Ling believed to be genuine shock. Surely, the other didn't expect him to know about these crimes, so it had to be a shock that instead of fondness, Jin Ling saw the two of them as shady people.

"Ah, but Jin Ling..." Jin GuangYao tried to placate him, but Jin Ling had none of it.

"I don't know what you're planning, but I'm not having you snooping around like this." Not like he thought he could stop Jin GuangYao from snooping around like this, but he still had to give voice to his protests.

"Jin Ling, please. What do you mean? Sect Leader Jin and I just want to help, naturally, this is not snooping around..." He shook his head, as if in disbelief. "I sense that you dislike both of us. However, I don't understand what prompts such hatred. Have we not been by your side, raised you, loved you? What makes you say such outrageous things?"

Jin Ling didn't even know what to say to this. He had actually a lot to say, but this man was not the Jin GuangYao who almost killed him, and he refused to share further details of the future. Instead of answering, he crossed his arms across his chest, glaring at his uncle, feeling hatred in every cell of his body.

"Jin Ling, since this is something that is clearly upsetting you, I'd like to compensate you. Please, tell me, so I can make it right."

These words were echoes of Jin Ling's childhood when this man said similar things whenever Jin Ling was upset. However, this thing between them, nobody could make it right. Jin GuangYao had held a string to Jin Ling's throat and threatened to kill him. From the force behind his hold back then, Jin Ling also knew he was not bluffing. Because of this, because this wrong could not be undone anymore, he refused to answer and instead, said in the coldest tone he could muster:

"Get out."

"Jin Ling..."

"I said leave!" Jin Ling snapped, swiping up one of the teacups, throwing it against the door, where the fine white porcelain shattered. Jin Ling glared at Jin GuangYao, who sighed.

"I see that you're really upset. I'll take my leave now. I will return in a few days; I hope by then, you'd have calmed down." Jin GuangYao then stood. With one last lingering look towards Jin Ling, he turned and asked to be let out. After he left, Jin Ling heard the lock click into place. This rigid pose he took up with Jin GuangYao actually really hurt his back, so he groaned, going back to lie down and be miserable that way.

## Reminiscence II.

When Jin GuangYao returned a few days later as he promised, Jin Ling was not pleased at all. He refused to say a word as Jin GuangYao entered and sent the guards out. He refused to open his mouth as they sat by the table. Refused to touch the tea prepared to him. Refused to answer when Jin GuangYao began speaking. Eventually, Jin GuangYao also realized this and with a hopeless air, he left Jin Ling's rooms, promising to speak later. Jin Ling was not looking forward to this. He already returned once and Jin Ling refused to answer, did he not understand the message?!

After a few more days, Jin GuangYao indeed returned and kept asking him questions, drawing conclusions from Jin Ling's reactions. Jin Ling wasn't worried about this. Jin GuangYao tried to figure out how they came to the past, but he kept asking about the future and drew the wrong conclusions; how could he be worried? The things his paternal uncle came up with, they weren't even worth mentioning. Although he did figure some things out, they were insignificant and in Jin Ling's opinion it didn't matter whether he knew the Jin Sect joined the war with less effort last time, or that the Wen Lan SiZhui saved died last time.

These long days, heavy with one-sided discussions with Jin GuangYao turned into weeks, and Jin Ling's seclusion came to an end. He was also healing nicely, though he could still feel tenderness and lingering stiffness, it was not as bad as in the beginning, he thought he didn't understand how could people become disabled from only one strike of the discipline whip? Lan SiZhui explained to him those people had a weaker cultivation than Jin Ling, to which Jin Ling answered; naturally, he was the Jin Sect Leader, his spiritual powers were indeed high.

He sat every day at the table, expecting to be let out already. A few days later indeed, they came to fetch him. Jin Ling was given disciple robes once again. Once he was changed, he was led to the disciples' quarters not far from where he had been and shown an empty room.

"MouShi, this will be your room for now. A guard will also escort you from now on."

"What am I doing here exactly?" Jin Ling asked his host with a frown. The man, a guard but not the chief, raised his eyebrows.

"MouShi is to train with the Jin Sect's disciples, as is expected from a disciple of the Jin Sect."

"Aren't I a criminal, a prisoner, an evildoer?" Jin Ling looked at the other person funny; he thought if he was to arrest one of his own disciples, he would definitely kick them out of the Sect. The guard shrugged.

"Be grateful, MouShi. Sect Leader Jin is soft on you, he really wants you to become a better person, so he permitted this. He acknowledges you were only an accomplice to the tyrant, ChunYu-Jun and might not even have acted of your own free will."

"Bullshit!" Jin Ling told him. To this, the guard shrugged again.

“This is not my opinion. If you really want to be kicked out, talk to Sect Leader Jin yourself. However, until then, this is your role now.”

“I don’t even have my weapons.” Jin Ling argued. “How am I to train then?”

“This is not my problem.” The man told him. He then turned to a person approaching and bowed. “MouShi, this is Jin LiBei, who is the Grandmaster of the Jin Sect.” The guard introduced them. Jin LiBei acknowledged the guard, then looked over at Jin Ling, looking him up and down. He was an old person, possibly even older than Grandmaster Lan. His beard was already white, though what little hair remained on his head was grey, pulled up into a bun with an elaborate hair ornament. He was emitting the aura of a person who thinks themselves above anyone else. The man didn’t speak and after a while, Jin Ling began to feel uncomfortable.

“What?!” He asked.

“Sir, this is MouShi, Jin Ling. Excuse him, he is known to have horrible manners and a temperament.” The guard said after Jin LiBei didn’t answer.

“I can introduce myself.” Jin Ling told him, angry at him in offense. Like he was a disobedient child who needed to be taught how to greet his elders!

“Then why did this disciple failed to do so?” Jin LiBei asked in a thin voice, that sounded like once it used to be raspy and strong, but by now it lost it’s strength entirely.

“I’m not here to exchange courtesies.” Jin Ling told him. Grandmaster Jin huffed.

“This disciple has clearly not learnt manners as a child. No matter.” Grandmaster Jin said. “Since this disciple is here to learn, that is what this disciple will do.” He said, then turned and began walking. Jin Ling initially didn’t go after him, but then the guard actually nudged him to start walking.

“Don’t touch me!” Jin Ling told him and followed Grandmaster Jin.

They went to a familiar building. Jin Ling had his classes taught here in the future as well. As he was led into the second room, it revealed that the place didn’t change much – it looked very similar in the future as well. This was a classroom, where in the main room, mostly group classes were held. This room looked similar to the Lanshi in the Cloud Recesses, for there was a podium for the teacher to sit and facing him were several tables. However, the décor of the room was quite different. Where the Lanshi was bare with a few paintings as decoration and held a few common books, including *Righteousness* in several copies, in the Jin Sect’s classroom there were shelves full of books. There was also several decoration items scattered all over the place. In one corner by the window was a seating area with tea.

The second room was quite different. This was a room dedicated to individual studies. Naturally, the main family’s children couldn’t be put on the same level as the common disciples, so instead, they made this room to keep them separated. Since the gentry children were taught individually, the common disciples often felt they were quite different – because of this, the Jin Sect decided that teaching their children in a completely separate environment

was not good and put this room in the same space as the classroom. Separated, but still in the same space, so the common disciples knew even though their future Sect Heads were better than them, they still had to study hard.

Jin Ling spent a lot of time here in his own time as well, so he was familiar with this. The room was prepared with several luxury items and here, tea was on the main table instead of to the side. The atmosphere was also intimate, designed to have the gentry child at ease, not putting the teacher above them.

Jin Ling was led into this room, which surprised him. If the Jin Sect knew who he was, he expected this of them, however, from the outside, this had to look strange. For common disciples, Jin Ling was simply a criminal, not better than a beggar on the streets. However, he got the special treatment of being in the gentry's classroom, Sect Leader Jin must really like him!

Grandmaster Jin sat without waiting for Jin Ling, and Jin Ling found this annoying. If he was taught as a gentry, the Grandmaster should handle him with as much respect as a god, yet he sat without waiting for him! His guard stopped in the doorway. Jin Ling went over and sat. Grandmaster Jin prepared some books, then cleared his throat, and in a clear, but monotone voice began the lesson without waiting a moment longer.

Jin Ling spent his days like this, but also was taken to sword practice as well as archery and horse riding lessons. Like he didn't already know all of this! As the Jin Sect heir, he was supposed to know all these things already.

He got another practice sword and a practice bow that was definitely not Huangfeng. While he attended these classes, Jin Ling was put together with the other disciples. Since he had previously trained here during the Wen Indoctrination, he recognized several people. The disciples were wary of him, but they didn't outright reject him. However, during weapon training his guard was watching closely, and he was only allowed to spar with him or the teacher, never a disciple mate.

This annoyed Jin Ling, but he submitted himself to it.

After a few weeks of this, he finally settled into this routine and began wondering about Lan SiZhui. He picked up the habit to ask his guard every day, for they rotated daily, if they would tell him where Lan SiZhui was, or what was his punishment. However, his guards always refused him.

Eventually, Jin Ling finally began hearing rumors about this.

"Did you hear?" One of the disciples asked their disciple mates as they had lunch in the mess hall, sitting in groups. Jin Ling sat with a group that didn't talk to each other, so he didn't feel bad about not talking to them either. The conversation drifted over from the other table. "The Nie Sect sent their demands to compensate them."

"What is it?" Another disciple asked eagerly. "Did ChunYu-Jun receive the discipline whip? I've heard only one strike with it can cripple a person for life!"

“It’s not that.” The first person shook his head. “They say Sect Leader Nie was also close to ChunYu-Jun and went easy on him. I’ve heard he was to be caned on the bottom of his feet.”

“Bullshit.” Another disciple cut in. “I’ve also heard people talking. I’ve heard Sect Leader Nie was close to ChunYu-Jun, but he actually felt betrayed by him and ordered him to be walked on hot coal.”

“Does this imaginary Sect Leader Nie has a foot fetish?” Another disciple snorted into his bun. “You’re all talking nonsense. This is the Nie Sect we’re talking about. Surely, they won’t be satisfied with anything less than chopping off an arm!”

Jin Ling decided not to listen anymore, feeling these rumors got more and more ridiculous. However, he kept an ear out, and indeed, there was one rumor repeated more than the others, and it was the first one he heard.

For a while after this, Jin Ling heard nothing about him. Occasionally, the disciples would bring him up, but it was never in relation of current events, only about Nightless City, the Wen or the Sunshot Campaign. When he next heard about him, it was also in a flurry of activity in the Koi Tower, for the Jin Sect was about to welcome an important guest. Disciples were instructed where they were not supposed to go during this time, and also educated how to act if they did run into the important guest.

Jin Ling only learned this important guest was Lan XiChen when he saw him walking with Jin GuangShan and Jin GuangYao. They were heading towards the back of the buildings. Lan XiChen was holding Shuoyue, but Liebing was nowhere to be seen, his hand empty behind his back, though his fingers were curled into a tight fist. As they passed the training grounds, he looked over, seemingly indifferent. Jin Ling thought he might’ve seen Jin Ling as he swept his gaze over the training disciples, but then he turned back to Jin GuangShan and answered something.

Hours later, they heard rumors once more.

“Come here.” One of the disciples whispered as they were waiting for their teacher to arrive. There was a group in the middle of the common classroom leaned close together. They were talking quietly, but Jin Ling still overheard.

“A-Xun, did your uncle hear something?”

“Indeed.” The first disciple nodded. “They say Sect Leader Lan is here to deliver the Su Clan’s demands towards ChunYu-Jun as well. They say it is very brutal!”

“What is it?!” The disciples asked excitedly.

“They are going to use the discipline whip on him!”

Several people made horrified sounds at this.

“Good!” One of the disciples from the other end of the room called out. “I say the more strikes he gets, the better!” With this, he turned back to the front of the room. The disciples in

the middle looked over, then huddled close once more.

“That is Luo Chan. ChunYu-Jun killed his father during the attack on the Wen village.” They said.

“Was it really ChunYu-Jun who killed those people?” Someone asked quietly. “After all, the Wen dogs were there as well. I hear the Clan Leader, Wen Qing was a mad doctor. Not only did she publish theories about mutilating a person’s Golden Core, she was also very savage. If you had injured a finger, she would amputate your arm. If you had a cough, she would give you a tincture to make you drown in your own blood!”

This, Jin Ling couldn’t take, and he slammed his hand on the table he sat by to shut them up. Every disciple looked over at him, but before they could begin gossiping again, Grandmaster Jin entered.

It was only a few days later that Jin Ling heard the rumor that Lan SiZhui had killed someone while in prison. They were in the disciples’ quarters in the Koi Tower, and while Jin Ling’s accommodations were farther from the rest, he still overheard as some disciples talked in the courtyard, huddled around a table, playing some silly games. A disciple who was not there previously showed up and quickly sat at the table, leaning in to talk to the others.

“Jin Rong, where have you been?” Asked one of the disciples who was playing. “Weren’t you with your brother just now?”

“I was.” The newcomer agreed. “However, as we were walking near the back buildings, there were guards, not letting us through.”

“How can it be?” Someone else asked, so Jin Rong explained:

“We were just as surprised. We asked the guard why we couldn’t go in, and he said there had been a murder committed there and resentful energy was rising, nobody is permitted to enter at this time.” He paused, then continued: “As we were leaving, we met some guards, so we asked them what happened. Since my brother is the Jin Sect Leader’s sixth cousin twice removed, the guard didn’t hold back. They said it was because of ChunYu-Jun! He was locked in the prisons with another person. However, just hours ago, there was a disturbance. It turned out, ChunYu-Jun had been torturing his prison mate for days now, but the guards couldn’t do anything, since they didn’t want the other prisoner walking around free either, they had no choice but to leave them together. They tried to teach ChunYu-Jun a lesson and punished him for this act, but it had no effect on the evildoer. Who knew two days after they punished him for it, not only did he continue the torture, he actually killed this other person!”

“Killed them?!” The others were shocked. “But he is a prisoner – how could he do that without his weapons and freedom?”

“Naturally, this is ChunYu-Jun, the Wen scum who killed thousands to revenge his uncle, Wen RuoHan. How could he not do this? The guards said there was resentful energy rising. ChunYu-Jun is a demonic cultivator, he doesn’t need a weapon to torture someone, all he has to do is call the shadows and they do his bidding!”



“This Wen scum, he is truly evil!” Said some others. Hearing this, Jin Ling’s anger rose, however, with the guard at his back, he couldn’t do anything. Instead, he just went back to his rooms and pretended to be deaf.

While this was also shocking news, the more shocking were the following events. Jin Ling was training with the disciples as usual. They had bow practice now, and while the teacher was explaining them a technique Jin Ling surely knew by heart by now, there was a disturbance. The teacher trailed off in his lesson and hesitated before bowing. Looking over, the disciples also saw that Jin ZiXuan had arrived. They all bowed to him, even Jin Ling, who had no choice. Grandmaster Jin was very harsh, tried to ‘teach him some manners’, so Jin Ling had to do this, or else his hands were caned!

“Young Master Jin, what can I do for you?” Asked the teacher. Jin ZiXuan arrived alone. Everyone knew by now the Young Master was too busy by now with the planning of the wedding to attend his classes, but he was also old enough not to be subjected to them despite his duties. He inclined his head towards the teacher.

“My brother wishes to speak with Jin Ling.” Jin ZiXuan told the teacher. “He said this was an urgent matter. Would this teacher horribly mind if I took him now?” This embarrassed Jin Ling greatly. However, he kept his mouth shut as the teacher allowed this. The guard followed Jin Ling with a confused expression as he went over and joined Jin ZiXuan, who didn’t move however. Jin Ling looked at him annoyed. “Bow to your teacher.” Jin ZiXuan ordered quietly. Humiliation burned Jin Ling’s face as he held his tongue and bowed to the teacher before Jin ZiXuan led him away. Once they were out of earshot and sight, Jin Ling turned to his father.

“Talk to me like this again, and I’ll—”

“You will what?” Jin ZiXuan asked arrogantly. Jin Ling glared at him, full of humiliation at being ordered around like this and fetched from his class, like a child whose father worried he was too sick to attend! Naturally, as soon as this thought popped into his head, he got even madder.

“You—!” Jin Ling started, but Jin ZiXuan rolled his eyes at him and turned to the guard.

“Follow us five paces behind.” He ordered sternly. To this, the guard bowed and obeyed. They began walking again. Jin Ling was annoyed with the other person and this whole situation as well – naturally, Jin ZiXuan was the Young Master of the Jin Sect, it was expected that the guard would listen to him. At the same time, how could this guard let Jin ZiXuan order him back, while the other was talking to a dangerous criminal?! Was he completely stupid? If he was that guard, he would kill himself in shame. He also didn’t understand why Jin ZiXuan came to fetch him, what did Jin GuangYao want with him and why were they walking around in a leisure pace. He asked:

“What?” However, from this, Jin ZiXuan didn’t understand and said:

“He is a guard, naturally, he cannot be allowed to hear an intimate discussion the Young Master is to have.”

“I don’t care about the guard.” Jin Ling said, although this was a lie, it was also not that important as the other things he wanted to know. “What intimate discussion are you to have? What does my un—Jin GuangYao want?”

“A-Yao is busy with the wedding planning.” Jin ZiXuan said with a shake of his head. “He does not have time to talk to you anymore.”

“Then how is this urgent matter going to be discussed?!” Jin Ling asked. He didn’t have time to talk to him, how did he have time to visit his rooms every few days while Jin Ling was in seclusion?! This person was really too much.

“There is no urgent matter A-Yao wants to discuss with you.” Jin ZiXuan revealed. Jin Ling became even more annoyed. Why did people have to talk around their point all the time? Couldn’t they just say what they wanted? If Jin GuangYao didn’t have anything to discuss, why did Jin ZiXuan take him away then?!

“Why am I here then?!” He asked, significantly holding his voice back.

“Because he does not, but I do have some urgent matter to discuss with you.” Jin ZiXuan said. Jin Ling already figured that out! Did Jin ZiXuan think he was this stupid?

“What is it? Say it already then!” Jin Ling asked, wanting to get to the point already.

“If you weren’t so unpleasant to be around, you would have more friends than the Lan, who are decidedly too polite and well-mannered to not talk to you at all.” Jin ZiXuan noted, then pulled something from his sleeve and tossed it over. “Here.”

Jin Ling felt insulted at the first half of Jin ZiXuan’s sentence and was about to argue this, however, the next moment, something small, but heavy landed in his hand and he was distracted. “What is this?” Jin Ling asked, taking a look at the item. It was a qiankun pouch, quite heavy. Jin Ling went to open it, but Jin ZiXuan actually placed a hand on top of his to stop him! Jin Ling looked up at him glaring.

“Don’t open it yet.” Jin ZiXuan said, removing his hand. Jin Ling didn’t understand the other’s intentions, however, he didn’t argue, hid the pouch in his sleeve. Once this was done, Jin ZiXuan looked pleased.

“What is going on?” Jin Ling asked next. Jin ZiXuan looked uncomfortable, and he said:

“My wedding is in two weeks time.” Jin Ling didn’t understand why the other shared this with him. Was he supposed to congratulate? Was it strange to congratulate him on such thing? After all, Jin Ling was not a kid anymore. He understood how these things worked. In two weeks time, his life will be on track and he will eventually be born – how could he congratulate on such thing?!

“So what?” He asked instead, maybe a little rude. Jin ZiXuan looked at him strangely, then stopped and turned to him.

“You’ve always acted strangely about my engagement. Isn’t it time that you explain this?”

Jin Ling didn't know why Jin ZiXuan wanted this, so he said: "Explain what? I haven't been strange about this. Get married, whatever!" He was still thinking about his previous thoughts about the wedding night, so his face was red.

Jin ZiXuan continued to not understand. "People say it's because you're in love with Lady Jiang, but that can't be right, can it? You've barely spoke two words with her, and—"

"I'm not in love with her, are you out of your mind?!" Jin Ling truly believed his father had gone crazy, thinking this! Him! In love! With anyone! Let alone his own mother! Forget the guard killing himself in shame, now Jin Ling wanted to kill himself in embarrassment!

"Then why are you so weird about this?!" Jin ZiXuan asked. "In Nightless City after the war, you got upset over Jiang YanLi's rejection and stormed out, I had to go after you and tell you to behave, so you came back. Then, following the Crowd Hunt, when ChunYu-Jun took those people and I wanted to talk to you about this, you told me: 'What do you want me to say? Just don't screw it up again and it will be fine!' and stormed off. And then now, instead, you just said 'So what?'. Every time we talk about this, you act strangely."

"I'm not!" Jin Ling tried to deny. Seeing that Jin ZiXuan didn't believe him, he decided to say: "So, what makes you think I'm in... That I like Lady Jiang?! Instead of thinking that, draw the right conclusions!"

Understanding this, Jin ZiXuan asked: "But then, why is it so important to you that the two of us marry? You won't even congratulate, just act like this is supposed to have happened ages ago."

"You want me to congratulate? Then congratulations! Can we stop talking about this?! Why do you even care what I think?!"

Naturally, realizing he was supposed to show an aloof personality towards the world, Jin ZiXuan turned away and acted like he didn't care.

"I'm not seeking your congratulations. However, if you are so strange about this because you have an issue with it, then it is my duty to placate you or shut down any ideas you might have regarding this. So, whether you have an issue with it, say it!"

"I don't have an issue with it." Jin Ling told him. "I simply can't stand stupidity!" He said, and at this, Jin ZiXuan turned to him again with an insulted expression. "Yes!" Jin Ling emphasized. "I think you're stupid! Clearly, you like Lady Jiang for a long time now! Even the blind can see that! Yet towards other people, you act like she is not good enough for you. What's wrong with you?! Do you think you'll live forever? If you like her, marry her, if you don't, don't! Why do you have to act like you don't like her at all?!"

"You—!" At this, Jin ZiXuan wanted to argue, however, then he realized he acted like he cared again and quickly stopped. He shook out his sleeves and tried to act nonchalant again. "It's none of your business." He said. "So don't act strangely!"

"Does it matter?" Jin Ling asked. "You're already going to marry her. Good! Then you're finally acting normally, I don't have to beat you up to punch reason into you."

He saw that this also made Jin ZiXuan want to argue, however, the other took control of himself quickly.

“We don’t have a problem regarding this then!”

“We don’t!” Jin Ling agreed. “So why are we here?” He asked. Jin ZiXuan looked around, as if it just occurred to him where they were. Actually, while they spoke, they came quite far into the Koi Tower. They were at the back buildings, and have already passed the prisons too. The guard followed them five paces behind as ordered, not stopping them like they have with that disciple and his brother. Jin ZiXuan cleared his throat and said:

“As I said, my wedding is in two weeks time. Since this is the case, it is more often that I also join discussions about this with my mother, father and A-Yao. This happened a day ago as well. I went to have a discussion about this with my father in his office. However, by the time I entered, someone else was already inside, in discussion with him.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Jin Ling found this confusing. Was this something about the wedding Jin ZiXuan wanted to talk to him about? However, the other continued. It went as follows:

He entered his father’s office from the side entrance, since he was just in his rooms and this was the closest entrance. When his father summoned him, he must’ve expected him from the main entrance, because he was turned away from the side entrance, not even looking that way, talking to the person inside with his full attention on the other. Jin ZiXuan was in the cover of a soft, sheer curtain to the side, so for now, neither men noticed him. Initially, when he entered, he wanted to call out to his father. However, then he heard his father say:

“ZiXuan’s wedding is in two weeks. This would overshadow the joyous event. I do not want people to be focused on ChunYu-Jun when my son marries.”

“Of course, Sect Leader Jin.” Jin GuangYao said. Upon hearing Lan SiZhui’s title, Jin ZiXuan did not proceed, waiting instead to hear what this was about.

He wasn’t usually the type of person to hide in the shadows and eavesdrop on other people’s conversations. However, when ZeWu-Jun pulled him aside on the battlefield before they took Lan SiZhui here, he said something that cautioned him to stop and listen. The Lan Sect Leader said: *“For your father to go after them so harshly, I’m afraid Jin Ling’s worries regarding their treatment in Koi Tower are not entirely unfounded. I’d like to ask you to look after them the best you can.”*

Taking the Lan Sect Leader’s words to heart, he indeed tried to look out for them the best he could. He wouldn’t say in what way, but he reassured Jin Ling that Lan SiZhui’s treatment would be much worse without his interference. With this in mind, he continued to listen.

“After ZiXuan’s marriage...” Jin GuangShan said, trailing off pointedly.

“Of course, father.” Jin GuangYao now sounded like he was smiling. “After the wedding, ChunYu-Jun will not be the public’s concern anymore.”

“Mn.” Jin GuangShan hummed thoughtfully. “A-Yao. Are you sure this information is worth this action? I know Lan SiZhui somewhat. To do this...”

“Father, he is refusing to talk about it, just like A-Ling. This is for the good of everyone. If we learn this, we will be able to save not only our people, but everyone. Even ChunYu-Jun needn’t to go through all of this. We can stop it from happening entirely.”

“Still.” Jin GuangShan insisted. “This decision is on my conscience, A-Yao.”

“Father.” Jin GuangYao placated. “Once people think he is dead, they will not look into this; nobody will find out.”

“I’m not talking about the people here!” Jin GuangShan got angry then. “How are you able to even go to bed, having these thoughts in your head, much less look into the mirror?!”

When Jin GuangYao didn’t answer for a long time, Jin ZiXuan felt he had to do something, so he decided to rustle the door to the side entrance, then step forward, as if he had just arrived. Jin GuangYao was kneeling on the ground in front of the Sect Leader’s desk, while the man himself was standing by the window, looking out with a deep frown. Once Jin ZiXuan entered, he turned to his younger son, a smile overtaking his face.

Once Jin ZiXuan was done telling this story, Jin Ling’s thoughts began to rush around. Whatever Jin GuangYao planned, he planned for after the wedding. Also, this remark ‘once people think he is dead’, must mean they were planning on making Lan SiZhui disappear somehow.

“Why are you telling me this?” He asked. It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate this, but what purpose did it serve to tell him this? He was pretty much a prisoner himself.

“Important guests will be arriving soon and Koi Tower has a limited amount of guards.” Jin ZiXuan told him as if this was an answer to Jin Ling’s question. He then stopped in front of a building. It was an unassuming office, just like many others in this area, though they were so deep in the back buildings, there was not much around. This part was mostly visited by servants, guards and in rare cases, those who wanted to practice in seclusion. Jin Ling looked around confused why they stopped there. “Another thing – the Jin Sect likes to keep their possessions hidden. Sometimes things aren’t always as they seem.” Jin ZiXuan said.

“Just speak clearly; what does this mean?” Jin Ling asked back. “And why did you tell me about Jin GuangYao’s plans?”

“Young Master Jin.” A guard showed up from nearby, it was Li XingXu! Jin Ling got tense at this, but Jin ZiXuan stayed calm. The chief bowed to them and said: “Young Master, why are you here? This place is not suited to you or...” He looked pointedly at Jin Ling, who got angry at this. Who was this person to tell him where he could go?!

“Chief Li, excuse us.” Jin ZiXuan said, inclining his head. “I was just telling MouShi about my wedding. As you know, we used to be close in the past, and since he cares a lot about this, I thought I would tell him. I didn’t realize we wandered so far. Naturally, we have nothing to do here.”

Li XingXu seemed to accept this and nodded. “In this case, Young Master Jin, please allow me to escort you back. My men are concluding an investigation in the moment and it would be bad if you stayed here.”

“An investigation?” Jin Ling asked, but he was ignored. Instead, Jin ZiXuan said:

“Naturally, we don’t want to intrude. Is the investigation going well?”

“Indeed, Young Master.” Li XingXu agreed, looking over at a place not far away. There were several people there the two Jin didn’t notice before – three guards were kneeling on the ground, while they were restrained. A person who looked a lot like Li XingXu was standing in front of them, while three guards with paddles were standing behind them. It looked like the guards were about to receive punishment, but why? “My brother, Li Bing caught the culprits and is punishing them now. Since this is the case, please let us not disturb them and go back.”

Jin ZiXuan agreed and so the four of them headed back towards the main building, not speaking much after this.

“From here, there’s not much to tell.” Jin Ling said currently. “Once inside my rooms, I opened the qiankun pouch. Huangfeng was inside.” He lifted his bow, turning it once in his hand before replacing it next to him. “A single arrow and some money. Also these.” He pulled out the pouch and picked out two small items. One of them he held out to Lan SiZhui. Once it dropped into his hands, he knew immediately what it was.

“Our jade tokens?” He asked, surprised and somewhat emotional. However, he realized this wasn’t right. “I lost mine. Ah, I think...” He tried to think back when he had it last. “I think after the Wen village, the Jin took it.” He paused, feeling the smooth jade with his fingers, his brows furrowed. “These are not the same ones.”

“I also noticed.” Jin Ling nodded. “Mine was taken when we were arrested in Nightless City.”

“Then...” Lan SiZhui trailed off, realization coming to him. “This is why you said we were going back to the Cloud Recesses, isn’t it?”

“You also figured out.” Jin Ling nodded again. “After Jin ZiXuan said he promised Lan XiChen to look after us, I also put the pieces together. Jin ZiXuan must’ve also told Lan XiChen what he heard in his father’s office. Since this was the case, Lan XiChen must’ve thought we should escape. This must also be why Jin ZiXuan took me to that building – it was the same one you were kept in. It took me a while to put all the pieces together. Jin ZiXuan told me about the slack security surrounding my case nearing the wedding celebration because he thought I should go then. He took me to the back buildings and told me that cryptic stuff about things not being what they seem because that’s where you were kept. He gave me Huangfeng back to break you out. Lan XiChen must’ve given him these so once we have broken out, we would have somewhere to go.”

Lan SiZhui frowned. “This isn’t right.” He said. “Why send us to Cloud Recesses? Surely, the guards wouldn’t let us in, even if we have the jade tokens. Lan XiChen has influence, but the elders also have a great voice. If they view us as enemy, there’s no way to convince the entire Sect to be on Lan XiChen’s side. And also if Lan XiChen openly opposes them this way...”

“I don’t particularly care about the inner workings of your Sect.” Jin Ling said. “This is just what I concluded. Why else would he give us the jade tokens?”

“Maybe.” Lan SiZhui fidgeted with the familiar jewel. “Or maybe he just wanted us to know he was still on our side, looking after us.”

“I don’t have the energy to figure out Lan XiChen’s thought process. But we can’t stay here.” He looked around. “Who knows if the Jin Sect is already looking for us.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, putting the jade token away, looking back at Jin Ling. “In this case, what should we do? Go to the Cloud Recesses as you originally planned?”

“Not really.” Jin Ling admitted, looking a little more comfortable around Lan SiZhui now that they were on familiar ground, planning a plot to stop an evil from killing people. “This is the thing. That person in the mask was definitely Su She.”

Lan SiZhui nodded. “I also recognized the mask from the future.”

“Hard not to, when he kidnaps us and locks us into the Burial Mounds!” Jin Ling clicked his tongue, still feeling bitter about this. “We should find him, arrest him and take him in front of the Sects to confess.”

“Like in the future.” Lan SiZhui concluded. Jin Ling shrugged.

“This seems the only way to stop Jin GuangYao. He will not admit his misgivings on his own, not unless he is forced to do so.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui agreed. Of all their plans, this seemed to be involving the least bloodshed so far, so Lan SiZhui was in favor of it. “The problem is, how?”

“Yes.” Jin Ling sighed, moving his shoulder around.

“Are you hurt?” Lan SiZhui asked. Jin Ling glanced over and shrugged.

“My back is still a bit stiff. Shooting with practice bows is easier, because they were designed to get you used to the motions and not the draw force. Huangfeng is a proper bow. It is harder to draw, requires more engagement of the muscles. The discipline whip wasn’t as bad as I thought, but it still did some damage and needs to heal properly.” Lan SiZhui was surprised by the honest and even answer. Perhaps because they were still a bit at odds, Jin Ling didn’t feel comfortable snapping at him yet. “So, the first step is to find Su She.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed, not mentioning the change of topic. He still felt guilty about Jin Ling and the others having received punishments for his actions and things were still strange between the two of them because of the fight in Nightless City.

“How far does a transportation talisman take a person?” Jin Ling asked. Lan SiZhui frowned.

“I’m not sure actually. I’m not good at talismans. JingYi would know better.” He thought for a moment, missing his friend, but trying to think practical. “If we start to draw conclusion from other talismans and how they work, I’d say it depends on how strong a person’s cultivation is. Remember that talisman we used in the beginning? *Talking without Words*?” Jin Ling made a face at him, so Lan SiZhui explained: “It’s a talisman used by spies in the past. It is not popular nowadays, because the caster needs to be precise in drawing the characters and also need to have strong cultivation to maintain it properly for a prolonged period of time. The idea is the same. The stronger one’s cultivation is, the longer they can maintain the charm – if I’m right, the stronger one’s cultivation is, the farther they can travel with a transportation talisman.”

“Alright.” Jin Ling nodded. “So, how strong is Su She’s cultivation?”

“In our time, he is known to have a high-level cultivation.” Lan SiZhui told him. “If he wasn’t such a bitter person, he could easily make a name for himself without such plots.”

“Ridiculous people.” Jin Ling grumbled. “Alright, so he has a high cultivation. This means he can travel far.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed.

“How far, do you think that is? A couple towns over? The other side of the country?”

“What are you thinking?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“There are two possibilities.” Jin Ling said. “Either, he stayed in Koi Tower, hiding. I think this is unlikely for multiple reasons. If I’m right...” He trailed off, then nodded to himself. “The Su Clan did not attend the wedding. Su She began to pull away from the Lan Sect, declaring he would not show on the occasion if the Lan Sect made an appearance.” He said. “Because of this, wouldn’t it make sense if he also went back to Moling after the assassination, to make it look like he was never in the Koi Tower to begin with?”

“It does make sense.” Lan SiZhui agreed, but then he thought: “But if people knew he was not going to attend and stay home, why would he need to make sure he actually stayed there?”

“Paranoid people don’t make rational decisions.” Jin Ling said, then: “But what you’re saying has merits. The assassination attempt failed, so there wouldn’t be a serious investigation about this. After all, a lot of people could benefit from Jin ZiXuan’s death. But then, where could he has gone?”

“If the assassination attempt failed, he would go and discuss it with the person who sent him in the first place.” Lan SiZhui theorized.

“Too risky.” Jin Ling shook his head. “If he stays in Koi Tower and people see him...”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed.



“Even if he doesn’t think of it, Jin GuangYao has to, so he would send him away.”

“Send him where?”

“Yes, send him where.” Jin Ling made a troubled expression. “I don’t know. But we do know something for sure.”

“Hm?” Lan SiZhui asked when his friend seemed to have made a decision.

“He has to go home at one point. Then, instead of going to Gusu, we need to go to Moling.” Jin Ling decided confidently. However, at this, something occurred Lan SiZhui.

“Jin Ling.”

“Hm?” Jin Ling asked distracted as he stood and stretched, picking up his bow.

“None of us have our swords.” He said. At this, Jin Ling turned to him with a frown. “How are we going to get to Moling?”

“Jin ZiXuan gave me some money. Surely, with that, we can get there.” Jin Ling said, then took out his qiankun pouch. He took out the money and presented it. As they counted, it became clear to both of them that with this amount of money, they wouldn’t be able to travel comfortably to Moling. “Damn it. My father is really cheap to only give me this much!” Jin Ling complained.

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed distractedly, counting in his head. “Jin Ling. Getting to Moling on foot would take more than a week. However, if we hire a carriage, it would take us there in less than a week.”

“Do we have money for that and for food as well?” Jin Ling asked. “I don’t mind sleeping on the carriage if it comes to it.”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui agreed. “We would be able to afford very little food. I think it would be enough.”

“What if instead of food, we buy arrows?” Jin Ling asked suddenly. Lan SiZhui looked over, curious. “If we buy even three arrows, I can go hunting for food.”

“That would delay us.” Lan SiZhui said. Jin Ling pressed his lips together and sighed.

“Alright. They we go on with very little food.”

“We could buy vegetables. While we lived in the Burial Mounds, then later in the village, we did this; we bought a bunch of vegetables and made soup of it. It wasn’t very nutritional, but it kept our bellies full.”

At this, Jin Ling gave him a look Lan SiZhui couldn’t place, then agreed.



They went on foot for two days, in order to lessen the price they would have to pay for the carriage. Lan SiZhui bought some vegetables and they immediately made some food to eat before they set out to find a carriage that was cheap. In the end, they found an old man in Lishui, who was willing to take them for a reasonable price. Although his horse was old, it was also a sturdy, strong animal. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui agreed to the price, and soon, they set out.

They were quiet in the carriage, not really talking much. Lan SiZhui's back was still hurt, even though he didn't speak to Jin Ling about it, he must've known some of it. When Lan SiZhui first got inside the carriage, he was alarmed to note he would have to sit on an actual seat, where he would normally relax back into the seat. He would not be able to do it now.

For the first few hours of their journey, Lan SiZhui sat with his back straight, scooted to the very edge of his seat, so there was no risk of his back touching the backrest. However, at one point, there was a big rock in the way and the carriage's wheels bumped over it, jostling the whole wagon, making Lan SiZhui almost fall back. If he didn't twist to the side, he would have been in an extremely bad situation.

After this, Jin Ling yelled at the man to go easier, but still hurry up. The old man apologized and they continued their journey. As Jin Ling returned to his seat, he huffed, leaning back and crossed his arms, closing his eyes, as if preparing to sleep. He was also uncomfortable, fidgeting in his seat to find a comfortable position, however, once he did, he stayed that way. Lan SiZhui watched him for a long time. He figured, since Jin Ling was asleep, there was no point straining himself, and so he settled on the floor of the carriage instead, sitting with his back to the door in lotus position. Like this, he didn't actually have to sit properly and could relax somewhat.

He didn't notice when Jin Ling woke up, but when it became darker, Jin Ling asked the driver to stop for the night. He didn't even glance at Lan SiZhui still on the floor. Lan SiZhui was grateful for his friend's discretion.

They made some more soup that night and camped in the wilderness – the old man had brought a tent with him to sleep in, but they had none, so Jin Ling slept on the hard ground again, while Lan SiZhui slept with his side leaned against a tree again.

Their journey continued in this fashion for the next five days. On the sixth day, they arrived to Moling.

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Moling's city walls came into view in the early afternoon as the carriage left dirt roads and entered the paved paths that led into the city. The city gates were always open, and they went through them without issue this time as well. Lan SiZhui looked out the window of the carriage at the familiar sight. Jin Ling was sitting across him looking annoyed. He disliked the long journey and to sleep on nothing but dirt for the past few days, not to mention their poor foodstuff.

They headed towards the city center, where most shops were set up. Moling wasn't big enough to have a market, but this square was the equivalent of that. As they stopped, Lan

SiZhui was quick to open the carriage's door and get out, feeling better being on his feet. Jin Ling climbed out after him, looking around with a scowl.

"You know what, SiZhui? I've never been to Moling before." He said. The old man who took them here stepped next to them, so Lan SiZhui ignored Jin Ling for now and greeted him.

"Sir, thank you for the trouble." He said respectfully.

"You guys, this was a long journey. I got a good deal out of it, so there was no trouble at all." He said.

"Mn."

"I'll head back home tomorrow morning. Let me know if there's anything else." He told them and they bowed to him before the man led the horse away, back towards the city stables, leaving Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling standing on the city square, a little lost.

"Right. How much money do we have left?" Jin Ling asked, taking out the money pouch. As they looked over it, they realized it was not much. Perhaps it could secure them a room in one of the cheaper inns, but no food.

They agreed to this, and Lan SiZhui led them towards the part of the city he hadn't really been before. He knew the city fairly well, having spent much time here with Lan JingYi, but there were parts they barely ever went to. Lan SiZhui knew vaguely what buildings were in these parts, and if he remembered correctly, there was an inn around here as well.

They arrived to a wide street, where locals were walking around, or playing Weiqi in the shades of trees. There, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui indeed spotted a smaller building that advertised to be an inn. As they entered, they saw locals sitting around and having a drink or something to eat. They didn't sit, however, but headed to the counter, where a person greeted them.

"A room for two." Jin Ling requested rudely. The person behind the counter scowled at him.

"You don't look like you have the money to pay for even one night."

"I have the money." Jin Ling glared at him.

"Show me!" The person challenged.

"Are you stupid? If I show you how much money I have, you'll raise the price of the room. Tell me how much for a room for one night first."

"Two silvers."

"Two silvers?!" Jin Ling glared at him. "I get a room, a full meal and a hot bath for two silvers in other places!"

"Go to other places then!" The innkeeper scoffed at him. Since they only had two silvers left, Lan SiZhui understood the issue. He turned to the man as well.

“Sir, how much is for a room with only one bed?” He asked. Since he wouldn’t use the bed anyways, there was no point paying this much. The innkeeper gave him a look.

“This is a local establishment, not a brothel.”

“Huh?” Lan SiZhui was confused by this remark, however, Jin Ling seemed to understand it and he slammed his hand on the counter.

“What are you hinting at?!” He glared. “We are not cutsleeves!”

“You just asked for a room with only one bed. What am I supposed to think?”

“We asked after you said such a ridiculous price for a room with two beds!” Jin Ling told him. “What were we supposed to ask?!”

“Well, of course, but if you don’t mind only one bed, there’s not many reasons I can think of.”

“We’re cousins.” Jin Ling snarled. Lan SiZhui never felt this uncomfortable during a conversation.

“You don’t look it!” The innkeeper argued, looking them up and down. Jin Ling’s nostrils flared in anger.

“Cousins, not brothers! Are we supposed to look alike?! Use your brain!”

“How would I know this?” The innkeeper shook his head. “Alright, for one silver, you can have a room with only one bed.”

“Get us a meal and a hot bath as well.” Jin Ling said, then slammed the two silvers onto the counter. The innkeeper gave him a look full of suffering, then rolled his eyes and gestured a waiter over.

“A-Qing, please take these refined gentlemen to their room. Also bring up a hot bath for his majesty.”

“You—!” Jin Ling stepped forward as if he was going to beat the man up the next moment. Lan SiZhui quickly stepped up to him and gripped his shoulder.

“Thank you for the trouble.” He told the innkeeper, then guided Jin Ling away so they could follow the waiter up. Once they were far away, Jin Ling shook off his hand and followed the waiter, annoyed.

The room they were put in did not look much better than the rooms they stayed at in the village after the fight at Burial Mounds. There was indeed only one bed, a wardrobe, a privacy screen and a low table, all in poorly, but still usable state. The waiter assured them he would be back shortly with the hot bath and left them to it. Jin Ling scoffed as he looked around. After placing Huangfeng on the bed, he went around, swiping his finger over some surfaces, then his frown deepened as he looked at his finger. Next, he looked inside the

cupboards as well. In the meantime, Lan SiZhui went over and sat at the table, ignoring Jin Ling.

Even though he usually spent the night in more refined places, he didn't mind the cheapness of this one. A lot of people – much more, some cultivators even couldn't afford a better place to sleep, so Lan SiZhui practiced mindfulness and accepted this. Jin Ling didn't look like he had the same thoughts going through his head, based on the mutterings of this place being disgusting and dirty, and how, for such an expensive place, they could really afford to pay someone to clean once in a while.

“Here.” Jin Ling said, and Lan SiZhui looked up just in time to catch a piece of clothing thrown his way. It was a tattered cloak, once black, but by now the dye faded somewhat. He looked over at Jin Ling questioningly. “We’re going to confront the Su Clan leader. Since your face is well-known amongst the Lan disciples, it would be best if you disguised yourself.”

Lan SiZhui considered this, then agreed. He went over to the small window, opening it and shook the cloak out, a cloud of dust leaving it. He then spread it over the windowsill to air it out.

Their hot bath arrived shortly. By then, Jin Ling was done inspecting the room and was now lounging on the bed. As it arrived, and been placed behind the privacy screen, he gestured to Lan SiZhui lazily.

“You wanted to bathe earlier.” He drawled. “Go ahead. Your hair is matted and there’s dirt on your face.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui told him. Jin Ling didn't answer, going back to his rest. Lan SiZhui went behind the privacy screen. He shed his stolen outer robes, then hesitated as it came to taking off his undergarments. The shirt he had on felt like it was stuck to his back in some places, and surely, it would pull on his wounds as he took it off. However, the wounds would surely needed to be washed more often than they had been so far, so he took a deep breath, gritted his teeth and began taking off the cloth. Indeed it hurt, but Lan SiZhui pushed through it. Afterwards, he needed a few minutes to breathe through the pain. He quickly pulled off the trousers as well and carefully climbed inside the bath, hissing and gritting his teeth again as the lukewarm water lapped at the wounds.

He quickly washed the rest of his body, then his hair as well, feeling much better, even if the soap provided by the inn left it feeling dry and coarse. Afterwards he got out of the bath and saw the water was now murky with blood and dirt and felt bad. Surely, Jin Ling shouldn't bathe in this. He went to put on his clothes, but then he gathered the undershirt in his hands and saw dried blood in the fabric in some places. Surely, he should wait until his back dried before putting it back on.

He looked down at his chest, seeing the burn there as well and knew if he went out like this, Jin Ling would make a big deal of this.

“Jin Ling.” He called out, but nobody answered. He frowned. Did Jin Ling leave without him noticing? He looked out from behind the privacy screen, seeing his friend still on the bed, but

his eyes were closed and his posture entirely relaxed; he fell asleep. Lan SiZhui sighed and sat by the bath, waiting for his skin to dry, hopefully before Jin Ling woke.

It was an hour later that Jin Ling stirred. By then, Lan SiZhui was dry and he changed back into his clothes as well. He was just opening the door for the servants to take the cold bathwater away and bring the fresh meal inside when Jin Ling stirred, sitting up, clutching Huangfeng. He frowned as he watched the servants take the water away.

“Why didn’t you wake me, I’d have bathed as well.”

“Sorry.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together. “I figured you were tired and could use some rest on a proper bed for once. Besides, the water was dirty after I used it. Forgive me.”

“It’s fine.” Jin Ling grumbled. “It’s not like I’m as dirty as you were. My clothes at most.” He swatted at a spot on his thigh where mud was dried into the fabric. As the waiter arrived with the food, they went over to eat instead, enjoying a proper meal for the first time since they left Koi Tower – since the Crowd Hunt, probably, for Lan SiZhui.

Jin Ling watched him eat with a strange look on his face, and even though he finished his meal first, he waited for Lan SiZhui to eat everything off his plate before he began to speak.

“So, we’re here.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “What now?” He asked, not wanting to assume, besides, he didn’t have any ideas either.

“We will find Su She and bring him in front of the Sects, forcing him to admit what he did.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “Since we’re in Moling now, finding him should be easy.” Jin Ling nodded. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath. “How do we bring him in front of the Sects though?” At this, Jin Ling frowned, and remained quiet. “As far as we know, everyone is in Koi Tower right now for the wedding celebrations.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling agreed. “Even if they’re looking for us, they wouldn’t want to leave the celebration because of this.”

“It is likely that they send Jin GuangYao after us. After all, he is the one to do Jin GuangShan’s bidding.”

“Mn.” Jin Ling frowned. “If he catches up, our whole plan is useless. He would kill Su She or us.”

“If we find Clan Leader Su before him, we could head for Koi Tower right away, hoping to evade him.”

“Going back to Koi Tower even though we just escaped... Who would listen to us?” Jin Ling frowned. “We broke out and angered Jin GuangShan enough that he wouldn’t let us get away with this.” Lan SiZhui reluctantly agreed.

“But then, how are we to bring him in front of the Sect Leaders?”

“Yes, this is indeed a problem.” Jin Ling grumbled. He was thinking hard, Lan SiZhui could tell. He let the other, waiting him out patiently. “Last time... Last time, we were kidnapped. The juniors of such prominent Sects and Clans... Also, Wei WuXian was said to be there, so they also came because of that.” He hummed thoughtfully. “They lost their spiritual powers and because of this, they were forced to listen to Wei WuXian’s explanation.”

Lan SiZhui also remembered what happened during the second siege of the Burial Mounds. “Even back then, Clan Leader Su was protecting Jin GuangYao, denying Wei WuXian’s accusations. Also, Wei WuXian had the pages from the *Collection of Turmoil* to prove his point.”

“That’s true.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“But... Last time, the Sects came to the Burial Mounds to confront Wei WuXian and he was able to uncover this plot because of that, right?” Lan SiZhui thought out loud. When Jin Ling nodded, he said: “So, we needn’t to go back to Lanling with him, but we need to get them to come to Moling.”

“Alright.” Jin Ling nodded. “How? We don’t have any juniors to capture.”

“But we do have the advantage of me having a similar reputation as Wei WuXian had in the future.” Lan SiZhui said. “Based on this, can’t we lure them here somehow?”

Jin Ling frowned. “Even though you have a reputation, we’ve faced the Sects several times now. Short of capturing someone important, how would we be able to get their attention enough to lure them here? At this point, your reputation might not matter much, since everyone knows you’ve been punished. With everyone important at the wedding celebration lately, we also would have a hard time convincing them we captured someone important, even if it wasn’t true, since we don’t know who might still be there, and also they could easily check. We cannot just lie and say we have them.”

Lan SiZhui also frowned, looking down. He didn’t like that they were thinking of kidnapping someone to further their own gains, but he also realized they had little options. They were in a similar situation Wei WuXian was back then, and because of this, it made sense to think with the head of the villain instead of the righteous person. The next moment, Jin Ling began speaking again. “Someone important is not there though.” He said suddenly, having a realization. “And they’re also someone associated with one of our allies. If he realizes in time this is our plot... He might be willing to help and lie on our behalf.”

“What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked eagerly.

“Hanguang-Jun.” Jin Ling told him slowly, like this was a brilliant thing to say. Lan SiZhui didn’t understand though.

“Huh?” Lan SiZhui made a confused face.

“This about it. If we say... if we, for example, send a letter to the Sects, stating we’ve captured Lan WangJi and are holding him in Moling, Lan XiChen might be willing to lie on our behalf and instead of checking and reassuring the Sects he is indeed at home, in seclusion

as per his punishment, this would be able to convince the Sects to come here and confront us.”

“What if Lan XiChen isn’t willing to lie on our behalf?” Lan SiZhui asked. At this, Jin Ling shrugged. “What if he was actually at the wedding, but we didn’t see him?”

“He was not, he received two strikes with the whip and has no associations to the Jin or Jiang Sects. It wouldn’t make sense to allow him to go. As for the lie, what is one more rumor and terrible act ChunYu-Jun had done? Even if it’s not true, ChunYu-Jun has a reputation for being a savage. People speak all kinds of bullshit. They wouldn’t think much of it.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui agreed to this easily. Since it didn’t involve actually kidnapping someone, he had no serious issues with this plan. “But then, how do we know they believed us? And, more importantly, how long will this plot take? Remember, we only had money for this one night. We also don’t have Clan Leader Su yet.”

“We don’t need to stay here. Let’s hide in the woods and keep a close eye on Moling, on Su She. Once we see if our trap worked, we will capture him and present him to the Sects, revealing Jin GuangYao’s plot.”

“And if the Sects don’t come?” Lan SiZhui asked, anxious about this.

“They we stay at the original plan. Take Su She to the Sects, force him to confess that way. It would take longer and is slightly more dangerous... Oh, we needn’t to bring him to Koi Tower either. We can just take him to the Lotus Pier. Jiang FengMian is empathetic towards us, so he would listen to us.” Jin Ling explained as if he really thought this would work. Lan SiZhui was less confident.

“What if he doesn’t confess, or only confesses to the assassination attempt?” Lan SiZhui asked next. “Jin GuangYao could keep trying.”

Jin Ling went very quiet at this, bowing his head. Lan SiZhui waited for him to settle on an answer, for he himself had none.

“Then, I’ll kill him.” Jin Ling said with a sudden determination.

“Jin Ling!” Lan SiZhui stared at him in disbelief. Jin Ling looked away.

“So what if I do? I don’t belong to this Jin Sect. Mine is in the future, and I’m it’s Sect Leader.” He said, his voice ice, his spine steel as he sat there. “What do I care what they think of me? At least I’ll know my family isn’t in more danger from him this time around. You went against the four Sects to prevent your family’s death. Did you care for the consequences?” He didn’t wait for Lan SiZhui’s answer though. “It is the same for me. So, what if they banish me for it? What if they kill me? I’ll have saved my parents from dying. This, to me, is worth it.”

Seeing that Jin Ling just brought up how Lan SiZhui had also damned the consequences of his actions and acted anyways, Lan SiZhui felt he also couldn’t judge Jin Ling for this. As



frustrating as this was, he also understood the need to protect one's family at all costs. He lowered his eyes and nodded silently.

"Alright then." Jin Ling said, standing and going over, picking up some paper and ink from the shelf on the cupboard, bringing it to the table. "Let's forge a letter to lure the Sects here."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui agreed. This was familiar. This was the same way they managed to get out of the guest lectures in the beginning to go look for the Yin Iron shards. Lan SiZhui couldn't help but think about how much has changed since then. "Who should it be addressed to?"

"Sect Leader Jin?" Jin Ling asked. Lan SiZhui thought about it and shook his head.

"He might keep quiet about this." He paused. "Why don't we just send it to ZeWu-Jun? If he is going to help, it would be most credible if the claim his brother had been kidnapped comes from him; also, it is his brother, so he should be the one receiving the news." Lan SiZhui pushed the trays still between them away to see what Jin Ling was writing once he began.

"Would they believe him though?" Jin Ling frowned. "He is known to have been associating with us in the past." Lan SiZhui pulled his mouth. This was true. Then, another thought came to him.

"Why don't we just send one to each Sect Leader?" He asked. "This way, if either of them bring this up, they'll have to go through Lan XiChen anyways to make sure the rumors are true before proceeding. This way, none of the Sect Leaders can get away with not speaking about it."

"Alright." Jin Ling stood again and returned with the whole stack of paper. "So, the first one should go to Lan XiChen. What should it say?"

"Do we want to make it sound like we sent it?" Lan SiZhui asked. Jin Ling thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"If we send it, they'll know it's a trap, especially if Lan XiChen isn't willing to help us."

"Then someone else." Lan SiZhui agreed.

"A disciple?"

"Unnamed." Lan SiZhui settled and Jin Ling nodded. He positioned the cheap brush over the paper. "Sect Leader Lan, I'm writing with news from the Cloud Recesses." Lan SiZhui began, then thought while Jin Ling wrote. "Second Young Master Lan had been kidnapped by the criminals MouShi and ChunYu-Jun. They broke in during the night..." Lan SiZhui stopped to think while Jin Ling caught up with the dictating. "Ah, it needn't to be too detailed, right?" Lan SiZhui asked. Jin Ling shook his head. "Alright. Then continue like this: They broke in during the night, taking Second Young Master Lan with them. We suspect they also intended to take Feng CiKe, but were unsuccessful. Our investigation led us to believe the criminals are holding Second Young Master Lan near Moling. Grandmaster is unavailable. Please, come at your earliest convenience."

“Unsigned.” Jin Ling said at the end and blew on the ink. As he handed it to Lan SiZhui, he read it and nodded.

“Not the best, but it would do.”

“Mn.” Jin Ling said, pulling another paper in front of him. “How should we address Sect Leader Jin?”

“Do you know if anyone could be near from the Jin Sect?” Lan SiZhui asked. Jin Ling shrugged. “Then don’t put any personal detail into it either. Like a report. Sect Leader Jin, Second Young Master Lan was reported to have been kidnapped by MouShi and ChunYu-Jun. The Lan Sect is investigating in Moling.”

“Short, but to the point.” Jin Ling nodded, then passed this letter as well. Lan SiZhui looked over it and put it to the side with the other letter. “The rest should be similar to the one we send the other Sects as well.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui agreed. They quickly finished all the letters. However, once they were done, Lan SiZhui remembered something. “To send these... Shouldn’t we need money?”

“Ah.” Jin Ling seemed to realize this as well. He looked at the letters disappointed. Lan SiZhui thought.

“Could we ask the old man to take them to Lanling? Maybe... Maybe deliver them to Lan XiChen personally?”

“What, you think we should tell him to give them to Lan XiChen and he will pay for the costs?” Lan SiZhui didn’t think to ask Lan XiChen to *pay* for the costs. Although, he was sure the other man wouldn’t mind terribly, it was an incredibly thick-faced thing to ask for, not even in person but in such an underhanded way. He shrugged, hoping the old man would just do it out of the goodness of his heart; after all, Lanling wasn’t far from Lishui, there would be only a day more of travel for the man.

Once they folded and addressed the letters properly, they went out to look for the old man. After all, he did say he was going back the next morning, so he should still be in town. As they went to the city stables, they indeed found him. Lan SiZhui walked up to him and bowed.

“Ah, it’s you guys!” The old man said. “Young man, I almost didn’t recognize you in this cloak.” He told Lan SiZhui, who had put on the cloak Jin Ling found for him earlier to disguise him. “What is it? Do you need to go back?”

“Ah, no sir.” Lan SiZhui told him. “Sir, there is actually something we would like. We would like to ask you a favor.”

“A favor?” The old man asked, raising his eyebrows. “What is it?”

“There are some letters.” He pulled out the bundle from under his cloak. “These letters are addressed to some important people. They are currently in Lanling.”

“Lanling?” The old man made a face. “So, what do you want?”

“Sir, we beg you to take these letters there.” Lan SiZhui held out the letters as he bowed. There was a pause.

“You guys, I’m not a courier.” He said. “Can’t you just ask one?”

“Sir, the thing is... We spent our last money on accommodation in the city. Unfortunately, we have no money left.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “We hoped since you were going that way anyways, you wouldn’t mind?”

“Lanling is not Lishui though.” The man said. Lan SiZhui looked up and saw him frowning.

“No, sir.” Lan SiZhui told him. The old man huffed.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll take these letters home with me. The first time I get hired to take someone to Lanling, I’ll take your letters as well.”

“That won’t work.” Jin Ling told him. “These are urgent.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.” The old man said. “Lanling is quite far from where I live. To go there, it would be at least a day long journey, then another day to get back, not even mentioning I would need to find whoever these letters are for. This is why couriers do this; they get directed by the office, so when they arrive with a letter, a local courier can take it to the proper address, or if the courier is a personal one, they know the address already.”

Lan SiZhui was disappointed. However, then something occurred him.

“Ah, sir, on your way to Lishui, you would need to go through Nanping as well, wouldn’t you?” He asked. At this, the old man looked confused, but nodded. Lan SiZhui turned to see both him and Jin Ling, while he told Jin Ling. “In Nanping, there’s a small Clan, the Bao Clan.” He told Jin Ling. If he remembered correctly, they were also around during this time as well. He took out his jade token. “If one of the smaller cultivation Clans receive a letter with another Sect’s seal, they should be eager to deliver the message to the person.” He told Jin Ling. The other shrugged, so Lan SiZhui turned back to the old man. “Sir, can we ask you this favor then: please take these letters to the Bao Clan Leader in Nanping. Make sure you show him this as well.” He held up the jade token. “They should recognize it. Tell them to get these letters to the Sect Leaders in Koi Tower, separately, if possible.”

“Why would they take the letters without payment?” The old man asked. “If I’m demanded payment, I’m not doing it.”

“There’s no trick.” Jin Ling told him unexpectedly. “Tell them a Lan disciple in Moling gave this to you, but don’t tell them it was us. If they act as expected of smaller Clans, they would be eager to get into the Lan Sect’s favor, also considering their Clan is between the Jin Sect and the Lan Sect’s territories. To earn a major Sect Leader’s favor is more payment than needed. However, if they still ask for payment, tell them to ask for it from the Sect Leaders who these letters are to be delivered to.”

At this, Lan SiZhui turned to him in confusion. “Would the Sect Leaders give them money?”

“There are two possibilities.” Jin Ling said. “Either the Sect Leaders are scandalized by the thick-faced nature of their request and they’re lucky to get away with their head on their shoulders, or they’re compensated.”

“Wouldn’t they also think of this?”

“They would be too eager to earn the Sect Leaders’ favor.” Jin Ling shook his head. “Now that you mentioned them, I also remember the Bao Clan. I had to deal with them once, back home. They are a small Clan, aspiring to become a Sect, so if they want to receive disciples, a major Sect Leader looking upon them favorably would only be positive for them. I also remember them to be fairly alright people, unlike the bigger Clan Leaders like Clan Leader Yao.” He scoffed.

“Alright.” The old man said. “If I only have to give them to these people, that’s fine.”

“Remember not to reveal to them anything about us. Tell them you got these letters from a random person or a Lan Sect disciple. Don’t tell them how you know us or what we look like.”

“When you say it like this, it sounds extremely shady.” The old man frowned. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Do we look like gentry Sect disciples to you? If you tell them you got these letters from two random poor people you picked up in Lishui, they’ll think this is a prank.”

“Is this a prank?” The old man asked hesitantly and a little skeptically.

“No. This could avoid another disaster.” Jin Ling told him seriously. “I know even common people experienced the effects of the Sunshot Campaign, so don’t act like you don’t care.”

“Ah, guys... Are you really disciples of the gentry Sects? How come you’re so poor then?” The old man asked them. Jin Ling’s eyes widened in anger.

“You—!” He began, but Lan SiZhui was quick to shut him up.

“Sir, thank you for doing this for us.”

“Alright.” The old man took the letters and the jade token Lan SiZhui handed over. “I’ll take these to Nanping. But don’t blame me if they don’t get delivered.”

“That’s fine.” Lan SiZhui said, bowing to him. “Thank you for the trouble anyways.”

With this, they said their goodbyes and headed back towards the inn.

“Now, we wait for their response.” Jin Ling said.

Lan SiZhui felt they were back in the days they’ve just arrived and were waiting for Grandmaster Lan’s judgement on the letter they crafted.



## Reminiscence III.

Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling took up residence in the surrounding forest near the Su Clan's residence. Since Lan JingYi often returned here, Lan SiZhui also spent some time in the Su Clan's residence – although it was more common for them to go around town. The Su Clan's parting with the Lan Sect was a tedious affair, but in this matter, Lan JingYi's parents were also caught up.

Su ZhuoXuan, Lan JingYi's mother was of the Su Clan, however, she had married to Lan ChenGuang, who was not only of the Lan Sect, but also a family member of the Sect Leader as well. Because of this, when this rift happened, many Su Clan disciples began to look unfavorably towards those Lan Sect disciples who married into the Su Clan. Also, those of the Su Clan who married a Lan Sect disciple. Su ZhuoXuan was not outright rejected by her Clan, but she was clearly not welcome.

Since she was also part of the Su family, this meant her own family members shunned her, and this caused her great sorrow. Seeing this, young Lan JingYi always looked to the Su Clan unfavorably as well, taking this parting as a personal feud. However, since his mother was of the Su Clan, Lan JingYi also had ancestors in the Su Clan. Because of this, Lan JingYi couldn't actually completely ignore and hate the Su Clan. Their relationship was strained and rather complicated, but Lan JingYi had an obligation towards them he couldn't ignore and didn't either. He wanted to prove he was better than those Su disciples who completely ignored their Lan family members.

Sometimes, when him and Lan SiZhui visited the city, they also visited the Su Clan – and elderly uncle who was although hostile towards Lan JingYi, didn't outright refuse to see him, or a cousin who just gave birth, and even though she only allowed them in for a quick look and to give gifts, still didn't outright refuse to acknowledge Lan JingYi's family ties. Lan SiZhui figured, however, based on the atmosphere around them whenever they visited, it was only the matter of short years before the Su Clan completely separated themselves from the Lan Sect. This caused even more animosity between the two, resulting in such a toxic relationship as they shared in the future.

As they left the inn, Jin Ling also pulled off the blanket from the bed. Lan SiZhui looked on with confusion. Catching his gaze, Jin Ling just shrugged.

"We need it. Besides, this place is so cheap, they're probably used to patrons stealing stuff." He reasoned. Lan SiZhui didn't think this was a good enough reason, but he also didn't put up more of a fight. This was on Jin Ling's conscience. "Fine." Jin Ling glared at him. "When I have money again, I'll come back and donate a large sum, so they can make this a better establishment. Are you happy now?" Lan SiZhui just smiled at him.

They left without saying goodbye to the innkeeper. Jin Ling didn't want to deal with the man and if Lan SiZhui was being honest, he wasn't any more keen on it either. They headed out of the city then, into the surrounding woods.

Since Lan SiZhui also visited with Lan JingYi sometimes, he was also somewhat familiar with the layout of the Clan's residence. As he led Jin Ling through the woods, he calculated where the main buildings might be, then settled at a spot where he suspected they would be the closest to and had the best angle to spy on the Clan Leader's office and the main courtyard as well. On the first day, Jin Ling proposed they spy on them during the day, then at night, they work in shifts, so while one of them was sleeping, the other would be able to see if there was any activity.

"We don't know Su She's usual movements. For all we know, he does his shady business at night, in the cover of the shadows."

Lan SiZhui agreed.

They waited and watched, and waited and watched. Su She simply didn't show.

"Do you think he hasn't come here after all? It had been a week since we left Koi Tower – if Jin GuangYao sent him back, he has to have arrived by now." Jin Ling asked at the end of that first day, sounding anxious about the possibility of him being wrong. Lan SiZhui honestly didn't know.

"Maybe he's doing something else." He offered, though he knew this wouldn't be much reassurance. Surely, if Su She returned to Moling, he would appear. Jin Ling didn't like this possibility.

"What else could he do? He is Jin GuangYao's right hand, and Jin GuangYao is after us. If he's doing something else, then this is another plot. We based our entire plan on him returning."

To this, Lan SiZhui really couldn't offer any reassurances.

That night they switched watch three times, but nor Lan SiZhui, nor Jin Ling saw him. The second day was spent in a similar fashion, the two boys having climbed up on the top of the wall surrounding the city and the Su Clan's residence from the surrounding forests. Sometimes they thought they saw someone walking similarly to the Su Clan Leader, but then the person turned around and it turned out he wasn't the one they were looking for.

"These sword forms are awful." Jin Ling commented as they watched the disciples practice. "Do they have no finesse?"

"There's room for improvement." Lan SiZhui agreed diplomatically. The Su sword forms were similar to the Lan Sect's practice, although there were differences, it was easy to tell that it was not as refined and effective as the Lan Sect's practices were. Lan SiZhui watched with a critical eye, and he had to agree – they were pretty awful.

"This is boring." Jin Ling complained after a few minutes. Lan SiZhui agreed.

For two days, they watched, waiting for Su She to show up. Jin Ling was visibly anxious about this. After all, their entire plan was based on the assumption that Su She returned to Moling after his assassination attempt.

It was the night of the second day that they've actually spotted the Su Clan Leader. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling were just about to begin working in shifts, Jin Ling already becoming restless by Lan SiZhui's side. However, suddenly, he went still, and Lan SiZhui, too, spotted the familiar gait of the person crossing the courtyard in a hurry.

"Is that him?" Jin Ling asked quietly as they watched as the man hurried through the courtyard towards the Clan Leader's office. "That's the answer then." He said, watching as Su She entered. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exchanged a look.

"Should we...?" Lan SiZhui asked, but Jin Ling shook his head.

"At least this confirms that Su She returned. We'll need to keep an eye out to make sure he doesn't leave again, but otherwise, we should not make our move for now, wait for the Sect Leaders to arrive." He answered. Lan SiZhui didn't ask what if they never came.

"Alright. Then go, I have first watch—"

"Wait." Jin Ling hushed him, looking at the door of the office. They didn't expect Su She to come out of his office only a short few minutes later! "What is he doing so late at night?" He wondered quietly.

"He's going towards the sleeping quarters."

"I don't see him anymore." Jin Ling said annoyed.

"Come on." Lan SiZhui urged, pulling himself up on top of the wall. He was getting physically better – after all, moving around and eating regularly, even if low-nutrient food, helped his body get used to the stretch and pull of his wounds. Since that day in the inn he hasn't had the chance to bathe, but by now they were in an area where the mountains purged the water, so he made sure to wash his wounds daily. This also helped a lot, and already, Lan SiZhui could tell his injuries improved. His burn wasn't feverishly red anymore, and he noticed blood on the rag he used to carefully wash his back less and less.

It probably didn't improve as well as it would with medicine and proper care, but Lan SiZhui didn't mind this. After all, the point of the punishment was to last. Besides, just a few days of moving around, he already didn't feel nauseous and hurt whenever he got from a sitting position into a standing one. Even climbing the walls became easier.

Hoping the night would cover them as they ran along, they tried to follow Su She even though they didn't see him, only glimpses of him between the buildings here and there. "Where is he going?" Lan SiZhui wondered as they stopped to see where Su She would pop up next. Lan SiZhui arranged the tattered black cloak he wore, hoping this would further help him blend into the darkness, though Jin Ling was still wearing the light-colored robes of the Jin Sect, there was no helping that.

"To sleep, no?" Jin Ling asked. Lan SiZhui shook his head, spotting Su She and continuing onward.

"He passed his own quarters by now."



“Then, surely, something shady is going on. We should follow him.” Jin Ling said with a frown. Lan SiZhui nodded and continued to circle the buildings on the top of the wall. However, then Su She reached the wall and looked up, so Lan SiZhui was quick to crouch down, pulling Jin Ling with him, so Su She wouldn’t spy them.

Su She was looking up at the wall for a long moment, then he looked around, and then with a leap, he also jumped on the top of the wall! Lan SiZhui flattered himself more to the roof, encouraging Jin Ling to do so as well, not wanting to be spotted. But Su She didn’t look their way, making another jump and landing just outside the wall.

“What the hell?” Jin Ling wondered quietly as they watched Su She listen for a moment before taking off. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exchanged a look, then Jin Ling took hold of him and with his aid, they landed on the ground smoothly.

“That way.” Lan SiZhui pointed, and Jin Ling nodded as the two of them took off after Su She.

They spotted him not long after, going in a hurried pace, but not running, towards the mountains behind the city, towards where Gusu and the Cloud Recesses were. This mountain range was actually one that stretched from Moling to Cloud Recesses. This was the same mountain range Wanjian, one of the entrance mountains, and Wuye, one of the deadliest back mountains shared.

Because of this, these mountains also shared some of the properties the ones protecting the Cloud Recesses did. Even though these ones had no natural defense, since they were so close to the Cloud Recesses, they were still similar. The northern mountains both had the natural defense of always being dark and desolate. Although there were forests, they were tall, and it was almost impossible to see the sky in them. Also, dangerous rock formations littered both. Even though this was very typical to the mountains of the Cloud Recesses, here this was slightly different. The forests were blanketed by the trees and there were dangerous cliffs, but there was no disorientation as the three cut through the mountains towards an unknown destination, like in the mountains surrounding the Lan sect’s home, where disorientation forced those who did not know their way around to stumble into their death.

These were the mountains the Lan Sect and the Su Clan used to use for training, back before the two separated and argument broke out between them about who should use these forests for their training. Because of this, there was a path at first, leading from Moling to the woods; however, after a while there was no more well-walked path and they were just following Su She around in the rural forests.

They walked for a while, long enough for Lan SiZhui’s injuries to begin to throb, and for Jin Ling to get annoyed. Su She was not moving too fast, but he wasn’t moving slow either. They kept their distance enough to be able to see his robes flash between the trees occasionally, but not close enough that their noises drew attention.

“Is he going on a hike at night?” Jin Ling complained quietly. At first, the ground was flat and easy to walk, but now they were on a slight slope upward. Although this wasn’t an awfully difficult hike, it still made Jin Ling pant next to Lan SiZhui, who wasn’t faring better because of his wounds.

After the hill, they arrived to a valley, thankfully this slope easier to walk. They soon arrived to a ravine then, and Lan SiZhui noted, alarmed, he couldn't see the Su Clan Leader anymore.

"Did we lose him?" Jin Ling asked, frowning, looking around. "I definitely saw him come this way. Where did he go?"

"Do you think he spotted us and escaped?" Lan SiZhui asked as they headed towards where they both thought they saw Su She appear last.

"I don't think he's perceptive enough." Jin Ling scoffed. "Where the fuck—" He trailed off as they arrived to the place they saw him last. Lan SiZhui could barely realize what was in front of them when Jin Ling already took a fistful of his robes and yanked him to the side to hide behind some thick trees as they spotted where Su She could've disappeared to.

It was a dark cave at the bottom of a cliff. The gaping darkness stood unassuming, a thin fog surrounding the entrance, seemingly seeping out of the cave. There was a gust of wind, and even though the spring evening was lukewarm, there was a chill in this breeze, carried from the cave entrance. They waited for a long minute, tense, afraid that in their carelessness Su She heard them outside the cave just now. But when he didn't come out, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a look, inching out from behind their hiding places and going a bit closer.

"Do you feel this?" Lan SiZhui asked quietly, watching the entrance of the cave. Jin Ling made a questioning noise, so Lan SiZhui looked over. "This fog is not natural. It feels like dark energies attracted it."

"Dark energies?" Jin Ling asked with a frown. "What kind? The Yin Iron?"

Lan SiZhui shook his head. "If I had Hudie, I'd be able to tell."

Jin Ling was quiet at this, also watching the cave entrance. "What could Su She be doing in there?"

"I have no idea." Lan SiZhui frowned. "These mountains are rural, there's not even a well-walked path on them. Since these mountains lead to the northern mountains of Cloud Recesses, there's not much around here. I know there are some beasts. This had been a point of argument between the Su Clan and the Lan Sect ever since I was little. Apparently, these mountains used to be the Lan Sect's training grounds, much like Phoenix Mountain is for the Jin Sect. Since the two split, there had not been a conclusion drawn, seeing these mountains are close to the Su Clan, but also belong to the same mountain range the Lan Sect resides in. The Su Clan wants it for themselves, but this place had been the Lan Sect's hunting grounds for generations, and they refuse to part with it. According to ZeWu-Jun, it comes up on Cultivation Conferences sometimes, but they can never settle. They haven't been used for this purpose since I was growing up."

"It still amazes me how fucking petty the Lan Sect can be when it comes to the Su Clan." Jin Ling noted. Lan SiZhui huffed, amused. They were, indeed, petty towards each other. "Well, Su She is inside. I think it's safe to assume he cannot exit without us noticing, so why don't we settle here, and wait for him to come out?" He proposed.

Lan SiZhui agreed, since they were here to keep an eye on Su She, they should stay nearby and wait for him to emerge. Jin Ling found some rock formations not far away where they would be out of sight, but still see the entrance of the cave. They set up camp there. Since they were carrying their belongings – not much, to be fair – they needn't to even go back to their previous camp. Jin Ling laid down the blanket he stole from the inn, going to sleep without lighting a campfire; they feared the smell and light would attract attention.

The night passed without Su She emerging. The next day they ate some vegetables raw, not wanting to chance the smell of cooking alerting Su She – or other living things nearby – of their presence. Jin Ling settled behind the rocks, close to a slit between two where he would be able to see the cave. Lan SiZhui kept an eye on the surrounding forests, hoping to see some reason Su She was here in the first place.

As the day passed, Jin Ling got more and more anxious and impatient. “Where the Hell is he?” He muttered, nibbling on some beet roots.

“Maybe there is another entrance after all?” Lan SiZhui wondered aloud. As the sun rose above the horizon, the forest got a bit brighter, though it was still dark, now they could see that the cave led underneath what appeared to be a mountain, though from this close, it was hard to tell.

“Should we go back to Moling to check?” Jin Ling asked, then without waiting for an answer, shook his head. “If we go back and it turns out he was here all along, he could get away.”

“One of us could go back and check.” Lan SiZhui offered. Jin Ling turned back to him and gave him a look Lan SiZhui couldn't place, then he went back to watching the entrance. Taking this as a no, Lan SiZhui sighed and settled, accepting that they were going to have to wait again.

As night fell, even Jin Ling ran out of patience.

“He didn't show all day. I don't think he's inside anymore.” He said, pacing in frustration.

“Do you want to go back?” Lan SiZhui asked, looking up at him from where he sat in lotus position on the ground. He had hoped to meditate earlier, but he couldn't get into the right headspace, and besides, they were supposed to keep an eye out. Jin Ling shook his head in answer with a frown, and continued pacing. After a few more seconds of this, he suddenly stopped and faced the entrance.

“I'm going inside, see what is there. Maybe he teleported out.”

“And if he didn't?” Lan SiZhui asked, standing as quick as his aching wounds allowed, ready to follow.

“If he's inside, then I'll fight him, capture him and wait for the Sects to arrive.” Jin Ling said. “But I doubt he's still inside. It's been a whole day already.” He said, looking up at the sky. Lan SiZhui didn't point out that they didn't even know if the Sects were coming. Jin Ling knew this.

He sighed and nodded. "Alright." He then picked up Jin Ling's qiankun pouch.

"What are you doing?" Jin Ling asked, looking over and frowning at him.

"I'm going with you." Lan SiZhui said, confused.

"Why? If he's inside, we might fight – without your guqin or sword, you can't fight properly." Jin Ling told him rudely.

"I don't need them to fight." He said quietly. Jin Ling huffed. "Besides, what if you don't come out? I won't know what happened to you." Lan SiZhui told him. "Let's just go in together."

"Alright, fine." Jin Ling agreed in the end, rolling his eyes. Though knowing his personality, if he really didn't want Lan SiZhui to go, he would have put up more of a fight, so Lan SiZhui smiled at him in gratitude. Jin Ling ignored it as he went over and helped Lan SiZhui pack up. Once they were done, they headed towards the entrance.

They stopped just outside, Lan SiZhui shivering at the cold air seeping out. This was definitely not natural. He couldn't imagine what Su She was doing in such a place, unless it was to actually clear it up from resentful energy. Jin Ling and him shared a look, then Jin Ling turned Huangfeng over his hand once, quickly testing the string before they headed inside. They only had one more flame stick, and as they edged inside, Jin Ling lit it.

Even though he had the cloak Jin Ling stole from the inn, Lan SiZhui still only had three thin layers on. He pulled the cloak over his head and they went inside. The flame stick lit some of the cavern. They carefully went forward, Lan SiZhui expecting to either fall into his death or run into a wall. However, none of this happened after a couple of steps inside. Looking back, the outside was dark as well, but there was a faint light from the night in the woods that appeared to glow from the darkness of the cave. Next to him the flame stick Jin Ling was holding only provided so much light, just enough to get by, not enough to see farther away. They saw the tunnel leading inside, and after a shared look, began their journey. The way was surprisingly smooth, the rock underneath them not too uneven. They walked for a long time, long enough that their flame stick began to flag. Then they stopped and shared a look.

"Are we sure this is where he went?" Jin Ling whispered, though even like this, his voice echoed off the walls.

"Unless he spotted us back in the forest, led us here and then teleported away, making us believe he went inside here to lead us astray for a while." Lan SiZhui answered with a thought he'd had a while back. Jin Ling looked at him with an expression of 'I can't believe you just said that', then shook his head and said:

"Couldn't it be that we just lost sight of him and didn't realize where he went?"

"It's not impossible, but I highly doubt it. This part of the forest isn't that dense."

"Alright." Jin Ling sighed. "We'll go ahead for a while, then unless we die here, if we don't find him soon, we turn back and go back to Moling. On the way back I can use my spiritual

power to provide us some light, but for now I shouldn't, in case I exhaust my Core by the time we go back."

"Alright." Lan SiZhui nodded, agreeing with this plan, though not looking forward to going ahead in the dark.

When the flame stick burned out completely, darkness enveloped them. It was pitch black, Lan SiZhui not seeing anything, only faintly being able to make out Jin Ling's light-colored robes, but that might've been just his sight tricking him.

"I wish we had another flame stick." Jin Ling said quietly. His voice sounded even louder in the dark.

They had to walk around in the dark for a while. Maybe it was because of their slow pace, but the walk seemed to take them for almost an hour. They rarely ran into obstacles, sometimes into a curve in the cave's wall, sometimes a boulder that stood in their way. The ground was fairly even, though sometimes one of them slipped and they thought they were falling into their death, only to find out it was only a foot deep drop.

As they inched their way forward, after a while, Lan SiZhui thought he saw something in the darkness. Getting closer, he realized he could see a wall behind a curve in an orange glow. Sensing Jin Ling still next to him, they approached with caution, keeping their ears open to anything. This was clearly a turn in the cave, and looking out from behind it, Lan SiZhui could see that not much further ahead was another one, here the light stronger. It flickered, so it was likely torchlight or a campfire casting the light.

"It has to be him." Jin Ling whispered next to him. Now, they could faintly see each other, and Lan SiZhui saw Jin Ling taking Huangfeng's string into hand, ready to shoot whenever. Their gazes met and Lan SiZhui nodded. They both took deep breaths, then went ahead, to meet Su She.

The place they arrived to was a huge chamber. It looked a little like Cold Pond Cave, however, this one was not covered in ice at all, but instead in flat rocks that were rather light in color. Just like in Cold Pond Cave, however, here, too half the space was dominated by a lake. This was less separate than the pond in the Cold Pond Cave, the ground gradually sloping down to create a small beach in this cave. From the nearby fire's light, Lan SiZhui could also see that the lake's surface was as smooth as a mirror. It didn't ripple, there was no movement at all.

The fire that lit it came from a campfire a reasonable distance away from the water. This was clearly a set up for longer stays, a stand for some kind of cauldron or pot set up above it, though the container it was supposed to hold was not on it. There was also a sleep roll to one side. However, the person sitting in white robes on the other side was what captured Lan SiZhui's attention more. His eyes widened as he recognized the person, and next to him, Jin Ling also tensed.

"SiZhui! Jin Ling!"

“JingYi!” Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling both called out in alarm, seeing their friend for the first time in months, but also in such an unlikely place and circumstance. Lan SiZhui wanted to run over, so did Jin Ling, but then Jin Ling stopped and drew his bow as a person stepped out from behind the fire, where they couldn’t see him until now. Su She stepped up next to Lan JingYi, pulling out his sword, and holding it loosely against Lan JingYi’s neck.

“Not so fast, ChunYu-Jun!” The Su Clan Leader told him, glaring at him angrily. “Stop there, or I’ll draw your friend’s blood!”

“Su MinShan, step away from him!” Jin Ling called over, sounding furious.

“Lower your bow, MouShi, and no harm will come to him.” Su She said, however, at this, Jin Ling’s hold on Huangfeng only tightened. There was a pause, where nobody moved, then Su She scoffed. “You think you are so untouchable that even if I cut his throat, he won’t die? Let’s try then!” He said, pressing the blade against Lan JingYi’s throat.

“JingYi!” Lan SiZhui called out. Next to him, Jin Ling’s bow creaked as he pulled on the string. Seeing Su She’s glance towards them, Lan SiZhui threw an arm out to halt Jin Ling. The other didn’t lower his bow for a long moment, then he cried out in frustration, releasing the tension in the string, but he didn’t lower Huangfeng.

For a long moment, Su She just watched them, then also lowered the blade, though it was still aimed at Lan JingYi. “That’s better. Now, how about you seal your Golden Cores and block your spiritual powers?” He glared at them.

“So cowardly!” Jin Ling called out mockingly, not even considering doing what he was commanded. “You won’t face us with our spiritual powers intact, you force Lan JingYi to be your prisoner; tell me, Su MinShan, are we really that scary?!” He glared at the other, who returned the stare.

“MouShi!” He sneered slowly. “If you don’t seal your Core now, I’ll definitely cut his throat!” With this, he raised the blade again.

“There’s no need for this!” Lan JingYi called out, sounding mildly scared. “They will do it, right?!” He looked over at them.

Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exchanged a look. Su She was not the smartest person ever, but he wasn’t stupid either. He wouldn’t be averted by a few mean words.

“Fine.” Jin Ling scoffed, releasing the tension, then swinging the bow on his back, making the motions to seal his Core. Lan SiZhui watched as he did this with ease. Lan SiZhui barely remembered the motions. They didn’t really need to remember them, for this was a technique only required to use in very specific circumstances. Why did Jin Ling know this so effortlessly?

“You, too, ChunYu-Jun.” Su She said and Lan SiZhui looked over. “Even though you cannot use your spiritual powers, who knows what tricks you have up your sleeve.” Lan SiZhui frowned. How did Su She know his meridians were injured? Though after the last battle of the Sunshot Campaign in Nightless City this was common knowledge, this was not

something a lot of people talked about, so it was probably pretty much forgotten, or people assumed he recovered by now. However, it didn't really matter how Su She knew, he still knew. Lan SiZhui didn't have a choice but to repeat the motions after Jin Ling.

Su She seemed satisfied with this, lowering his blade slightly. However, then as if hearing something, he suddenly looked over his shoulder. As Lan SiZhui looked now, he only saw the dark wall of the cave on the other side.

"Now what?" Jin Ling called out, taking Su She's attention away from the far wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

"MouShi, all three of you are here. What do you think this means?" Su She asked challengingly. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"Oh, don't tell me this was part of some big, evil plan." He muttered. "I don't know." He said louder to Su She. "What does it mean?" He asked like he was doing a favor to the other for asking. To be fair, Lan SiZhui thought they probably did, since Su She seemed eager to explain.

"You know, my master told me this was going to happen. I just had to kidnap Feng CiKe from the Cloud Recesses; then you came running to his rescue!"

"Su MinShan, you're even stupider than I initially thought!" Jin Ling told him. "We're not here because of JingYi." At this, Lan JingYi made a face. Jin Ling ignored him. "We came to arrest you."

"Arrest me?!" Su She asked, incredulous. "MouShi, how come you've been a prisoner then a fugitive criminal only days ago, but now you're here with the authority to arrest me? What for anyways?"

"Naturally, because Jin ZiXuan knows you're the one who was trying to assassinate him on his wedding celebration, it is only the matter of time before they come for you. We're here to make sure you stay until they arrive." He paused, then said: "As to why you kidnapped JingYi... Since you said Jin GuangYao ordered it to you and he was trying to capture us here, there are two possibilities. He either wants to catch us like this and take back to the Sects, proving his worth to his father, even though he knows it is in vain, or he wants something from us."

"Don't speak about him like this. Who said he was the one ordering me?" Su She glared. "MouShi, who are you to judge others? Aren't you too arrogant? You always assume you're above everyone, yet who are you to make such assumptions?!"

"Who am I? Who are you to speak to me like that?" Jin Ling glowered.

"Who I am?" Su She returned the look. "I am the one currently holding your dear friend's life in my hands. I'd consider how you speak to me."

At this, Jin Ling huffed, but also ceased to argue more. Instead, he asked: "So, why are we here, Su MinShan?"

“Calling me like this, like we’re so familiar, you’re really full of yourself. I’m a Clan Leader, isn’t it unbecoming to address me any other way, for a simple disciple?” Su She scoffed. “Alright, fine. I’ll tell you.” He paused, looking over at Lan JingYi for a moment, then he continued: “ChunYu-Jun, MouShi, Feng CiKe. You really thought you got away with it?”

Lan JingYi, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui shared a confused look.

“Get away with what?” Lan JingYi asked with a frown. Su She looked smug at this.

“With your secret.”

“With our secret?” Lan JingYi asked back, his tone of someone who was asking the other person to make their point.

“I know who you are. I know where you’re from.”

“Yes.” Lan JingYi nodded, his tone and face serious, though this could only be a joke. “I’m Lan JingYi from the Lan Sect of Gusu.”

“Don’t play dumb with me!” Su She pressed his blade against Lan JingYi’s neck, who tried to lean away from it. Lan SiZhui suspected, if his friend had his spiritual powers, he would have already used it against Su She, so it was safe to assume Lan JingYi was also forced to perform the seal. “I know the three of you are from the future. Don’t even try to deny it! I’ve seen the documents, so I know for sure.”

At this, the three of them exchanged another look. Since him and Jin GuangYao worked closely together, this was not unlikely. Even if he didn’t see the documents, Jin GuangYao probably heard Wen RuoHan in the throne room, so he knew for sure by now. It wasn’t unimaginable that Su She also knew.

“Alright.” Jin Ling said surprisingly calmly. “We won’t deny it. So, what?” He challenged. “What if we are?”

“MouShi, so you admit it?” Su She glared at him. Jin Ling shrugged.

“I admit it. So, what?”

“So, what? You traveled in time!”

“We did, I just admitted it.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“MouShi, the three of you are really something else!” Su She said. “The gentry Sects are so arrogant, they look down on everyone. However, you’re even more arrogant. You think you can travel in time as you like, mess with people’s lives!” Su She cried in outrage.

“What is it to you?” Jin Ling scoffed. “We didn’t even talk to you before.”

“MouShi, do you think you’re so special this is your privilege? What do you need to travel in time for, huh? Born into a rich family and destined to enjoy an easy life. All you had to do



was open your mouth to be fed and lift your hands to be dressed. What did you need to come back for? Are there not other people who could do more with this opportunity than you?"

"Don't speak like you know me at all." Jin Ling told him threateningly.

"Don't I know your kind, MouShi?" Su She challenged. "All of you praise yourselves as decent Sects and noble gentries. You're just relying on your lucky birth and powerful family. How could you look down upon us? Aren't we also human? Do we not deserve to be addressed with respect? Yet you all look down on us. You can do whatever you want and nobody blinks an eye, but if I do something, I am reprimanded."

"Su MinShan, how could we not look down on you, when everything you archive, you do by cheating others? Even this, now, probably wasn't your own idea. You can't even think for yourself. You hold a grudge against others because of minor disputes, you're so petty. A man who cannot tolerate small misfortunes can never accomplish great things."

"Yet, you're the one who couldn't tolerate a misfortune and came back to fix the past. MouShi, are you talking about yourself?"

"How can it be?" Jin Ling scoffed. "You don't even know why we're here. You should not talk about things you don't know anything about. You'll just appear stupid."

"Who are you calling stupid?!" Su She glared. "MouShi, you call me stupid, yet look around you. Aren't you the one in the tight situation right now?"

"I'm not in a tight situation." Jin Ling told him. "I'm waiting for your master to reveal yourself, so we can talk properly. I'm not wasting another second on this conversation." With this, Jin Ling crossed his arms over his chest. Su She's face reddened and he glared daggers towards him.

"Talk about what things, MouShi?" He asked. Jin Ling didn't seem to going to answer this, however, after a pause, he rolled his eyes and said:

"Su MinShan, you know you won't get away with this. Jin ZiXuan knows you're the one who was trying to assassinate him on his wedding celebration, it is only the matter of time before they come for you." He said. "When they do, Jin GuangYao's real character will also going to be uncovered."

"Don't speak like you know what Lianfang-Zun wants!" Su She snapped, glaring.

"Don't I?!" Jin Ling snapped back, taking a step closer. "Isn't he my uncle?! I know better than anyone what he wants!"

"Jin Ling!" Lan JingYi reprimanded him with wide eyes. However, Jin Ling just rolled his eyes at this.

"What? He already knows we time traveled. What's wrong with him knowing who my family is? Besides, he's talking like I have no idea what Jin GuangYao is capable of, or that he's the one behind this all. Clearly, he has no idea who I am."

Su She frowned at this, at Jin Ling. “MouShi, answer me this then. If he’s your uncle, then why have you treated him with so much suspicion? Why didn’t you help him, instead of plotting with Sect Leader Lan?! Since you also know him, don’t you feel responsible?”

“Responsible?” Jin Ling asked back. “Responsible for his early demise, most likely!” Jin Ling informed Su She. “He is my uncle, not my father. You were also sent by him to assassinate Jin ZiXuan earlier. I definitely know this. Why would I help him then? I am not as desperate as him, for the Sect Leader position. I’d rather have my father than the throne.”

“Didn’t we all learn about people who killed their own family for the title? How would this be any different? Besides, even your father isn’t flawless. Just remember how he acted with Lady Jiang a year ago – isn’t he also just a worthless bully? Wen RuoHan also killed all his siblings to gain the title Sect Leader. How is this any different?”

“How is it different?” Jin Ling asked back. “It isn’t. So what? Do you think the children of those killed don’t also feel like they’ve been wronged? There is even precedent they took revenge. You say we all learnt about people killing for the Sect Leader position, how can you not know this? You’re also trying to get revenge. So, why is it different if I’m the one trying to take revenge? Isn’t it my father who is threatened? You say I’m not helping my uncle, am I supposed to help him kill my own father?”

“Besides, are you comparing Jin GuangYao to Wen RuoHan?” Lan JingYi asked skeptically, once Jin Ling was done talking. “Do you even know what you’re saying?”

“Enough!” Su She snapped. “This is not why we’re here.”

“Changing the subject because you realize you said something stupid, you really expect people to respect you like this?” Jin Ling snorted. “But fine, since you don’t want to talk about it, you shouldn’t even talk about it! So, why are we here then?”

“MouShi, you really think you’re smarter than every person in the room.” Su She scoffed. “Tell me then, wise one, how did you travel in time?!”

“Is that what you want to know?” Jin Ling huffed. “Finally, you reveal your cards. What is it to you?” He asked, looking at Su She confused. “What is my uncle planning on doing with this information?”

“Who said anything about your uncle?” Su She glared. “I’m the one who wants to know. I’m holding a sword to your friend’s throat, so watch your words!”

“You?” Jin Ling looked him up and down skeptically. “What is it to *you* then?” Jin Ling asked. “Are you going to be the one to travel back and save the world? Gain a name for yourself like this, hoping people will respect you then? Su MinShan, have you been living under a rock all this time? We’ve tried to save the world and ended up as hated criminals. Are you this dense on purpose?”

“Does the world need saving though?” Su She asked. “No, I’m going to right the wrongs people like me suffered from people like you. I don’t need to help other people. They end up in the situation they end up in because of their own greed; why would I help them at all?”

“You’re really something else.” Jin Ling told him. “You care only for yourself and your own unfortunate life, but you don’t realize this isn’t because of other people you were unfortunate all your life, but because of your own personality. You think achieving greatness depends on birth and other people’s favors, yet you have no idea. Climbing up people’s back, you’re just a lowlife! Put in some effort, maybe that way, you won’t be looked down on!”

“A lowlife?!” Su She glared, his face turning red. “Am I just a lowlife, because I have ambitions? The Lan Sect looks down on me because they think I betrayed them, was I not just doing what everyone was doing and try to save my life?”

“What are you talking about, why would the Lan Sect think you betrayed them? You guys never explained to me, in the future as well, people always said Su She betrayed the Lan Sect.” Jin Ling looked over at Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui.

“MouShi, you’re really something else. You claim all I care about is myself, yet you don’t even know this much?!” Su She huffed. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes and said:

“Clan Leader, this is the domestic matter of the Lan Sect, how do you expect people to pry into this? I’ll explain.” He told Jin Ling then, and said:

“Before the Sunshot Campaign, before the Wen indoctrination, when the Wen Sect attacked Cloud Recesses, the Grandmaster Lan ordered everyone to the Cold Pond Cave. However, the Young Master Wen, Wen Xu captured several disciples and threatened their lives if they didn’t reveal the secret to enter. In the future, it was Su MinShan who revealed the secret, and even though the Second Young Master Lan prevented Young Master Wen from entering, there were a lot of disciples inside that cave. If Hanguang-Jun didn’t sacrifice himself, they would’ve died. The secret Su MinShan told Wen Xu was a Sect secret. To tell them this...” Lan JingYi threw a glare at the other man.

“Feng CiKe, didn’t I do what everyone would’ve done in my situation? The Wen were about to kill me, who wouldn’t have told them the secret? It’s not like this was such a big deal!” Lan JingYi threw a look at the other, but before he could answer, Jin Ling spoke up:

“That’s it?” Jin Ling asked skeptically.

“No.” Lan JingYi said, shaking his head. “After this, after the indoctrination, Second Young Master Lan also went back to reclaim the Cloud Recesses. He went to the MolingSu, in hopes to gather a force to fight back. However, when faced with the elders, Hanguang-Jun requested their aid, but Su MinShan argued they were in equal danger and couldn’t spare the disciples Hanguang-Jun asked for. Su MuShi, the previous Clan Leader, Su MinShan’s elder brother, not wanting to offend the Lan Sect’s Second Young Master, and also not wanting to go against the elders and his brother, made a compromise. He offered that every disciple who belonged to the Lan Sect could go with Hanguang-Jun, but Su disciples would need to be spared to protect the Su Clan’s residence. This was the second offense.”

“Offense?!” Su She glared. “Feng CiKe, this was not how it went down. However, if this was, how could it have been an offense? The Su Clan needed protection, yet Lan WangJi came to take all our capable disciples, just to save a place that was clearly taken! In this

battle, Su disciples would have died for people who didn't even consider the safety of their own familial Clan!"

Lan JingYi made a face at this, but ignored Su She as he continued:

"Then, during the Sunshot Campaign, after Su MuShi fell in Qishan, Su MinShan actually called back his disciples and failed to provide backup until the siege of Nightless City began. And after this, Su MinShan even had the face to cut the Lan Sect off rudely, later on declaring their independence and even fighting the Lan Sect."

"So, this is the reason." Jin Ling frowned thoughtfully.

"Huh, I guess this time around, the MolingSu decided to aid the Lan Sect with three dozen disciples, I wonder what changed their minds now." Lan JingYi hummed thoughtfully.

"The Lan Sect, Lan WangJi, they are all so arrogant." Su She scoffed. "Lan WangJi came to Moling and demanded we hand over our disciples to fight for them, the only reason my brother agreed was because he was charmed by ChunYu-Jun's flowery speech. Also, the elders were convinced by my brother, he really had a weak heart for these matters."

"Ah, I get it now." Lan JingYi snapped his fingers with realization. "SiZhui, when you told us about those times, you told us you and Lan WangJi received healers before meeting Su MuShi, who at the time was in a meeting with the elders. I suspect, since you were with Lan WangJi, the situation was different than in our time, when he went there alone. In the future, he must've requested to talk to Su MuShi, however, the disciples would've told him about the meeting with the elders. Knowing Lan WangJi's personality, he wouldn't've cared if he disturbed the meeting and would've gone there and made his case in front of the elders. Seeing his blunt request, the elders must've listened to Su MinShan in this matter and Su MuShi, faced with the different demands of the elders and Second Young Master Lan, had no choice but to make this compromise."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui agreed.

"This is truly a matter of betrayal then." Jin Ling nodded. "Telling Sect secrets to the enemy, failing to aid a familial Sect, failing to contribute in war, it's a wonder it was the Su Clan who declared their independence and not the Lan Sect who threw them out!"

"The Lan Sect forgave them for the offense, although the first one would've been punished, the other two were forgiven, since we were in war and that is a tense situation for all, decisions are difficult to make." Lan JingYi said. "But before the Su Clan would receive their punishment for the first offense, they cowardly cut off their ties with the Lan Sect and never took responsibility." He glared at Su She.

"What are you saying, are you implying that the Lan Sect is righteous in their behavior towards us?! What a joke!" Su She fumed. Jin Ling shook his head.

"Su MinShan, as a Clan Leader, you should know this." Jin Ling glared at him. "As a Sect Leader, even I know there are secrets a Sect or Clan holds close to their chests, which would result in tragedy if told other people from other Sects and Clans. You knew well what would

happen to those disciples inside the Cold Pond Cave if you revealed the secret to Wen Xu, yet you still told him; is that how you lead your own Clan as well?! Then you're not only a bad person, but a bad Clan Leader as well! Being so careless with sensitive information, not caring about the lives of your peers, only your own!

"Let's talk about the second offense; even if MolingSu needed protection, are you truly that weak of a Clan you can't defend one small city with a handful of disciples? Besides, the Lan Sect was in danger, isn't it your responsibility and duty to help them out? If you were in a similar situation, I'm sure the Lan Sect would have spared no disciple to help you out! And then the third offense; you were in the middle of war. Everyone lost lives, the Ji Clan even lost their Clan Leader, yet they still continued to fight! Do you have no sense of duty whatsoever?!"

"You—!" Su She stepped towards Jin Ling, his eyes wide and angry. "How dare you insult me like this?! You know there were not only people inside the cave but outside as well! Should we have died instead?! More than ten disciples were slayed just to give up the secret, yet they kept their mouth shut in some misguided idea of righteousness!"

"Maybe, but those disciples also knew what the consequences of them keeping their mouths shut would come with!" Lan JingYi argued, angry as well. "They sacrificed their lives so the people on the inside could live, which is why they are still remembered fondly in the Lan Sect, even those Su disciples who lost their lives there that day! It was an honor to die for their peers, not a burden!"

"You're delusional!" Su She told him. "Those people died for nothing, they died to protect something that in the end, didn't even matter!"

"And don't you think this is why so many people look down on you?!" Jin Ling asked. "You're a known coward. Even when people say you could save the world by just pulling one of your hair out, you wouldn't do it because it would hurt you. Just how pathetic can you be?! Think about it. During the battle of Cloud Recesses, didn't you also make a deal with Wen Xu, to protect your Clan from demise? Then, later, this favor was repaid by you, drawing the map for Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu to escape the Cloud Recesses before the fight in the Nightless City. Should I even ask how your brother, Shu MuShi died during the battle in Qishan?!"

"Are you hinting at something, MouShi?!" Su She glared. "Are you insinuating I've killed my own brother to become Clan Leader?!" This also made Lan SiZhui pause and think about this.

"Su MuShi, I've only met him a handful of times, but all those times he was favorable towards the Lan Sect. He even helped out during the reclaiming of Cloud Recesses. It was said just now, that he was the one to convince the elders to give Lan WangJi three dozen disciples to help out during the reclaiming of the Cloud Recesses."

"Yes." Jin Ling agreed with Lan SiZhui. "And we all know you're desperate to separate your Clan from the Lan Sect." He told Su She. "Your brother never would've approved of this. Even if you didn't kill him, his death was good for you. You'd have never had the backbone to stand up to him otherwise!"

“MouShi! You’re going too far! Watch your mouth!” Su She snarled at him. Jin Ling snorted, looking away.

“Anyways, after this, you became close friends with Jin GuangYao, helping him out in the siege of the Wen village. I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out the letter sent to Jin GuangShan was actually your doing, on Jin GuangYao’s orders, to bring Lan SiZhui back to the Koi Tower. Only, Jin GuangYao didn’t expect Lan SiZhui to be so attached to the Wen as to break them out of prison and leave early.” Jin Ling paused. “I’m only confused as to how this also helps you out.”

“How does this help me?” Su She frowned at him. “MouShi, you’re so smart, listing these events from the top of your head, can’t you figure this out? The respected hero and tactician of the Sunshot Campaign, you really are just a dumb kid who got born into the right surname!”

At this, Jin Ling glared.

“Time travel.” Lan JingYi said unexpectedly. Looking over at him, they saw he had a thoughtful expression on his face. As he noticed the others looking at him, Lan JingYi explained: “Jin GuangYao wants to time travel to stop his father from kicking him out of the Jin Sect when he arrived there to claim his position as Jin GuangShan’s son. Ah, do you remember?” He looked at Jin Ling, who nodded and took over.

“Jin GuangYao, Meng Yao was born as the son of a prostitute. He knew all his life he was Jin GuangShan’s son, because his mother told him. Then Meng Shi died of an illness and Meng Yao went to Koi Tower to beg for his father’s recognition and learn cultivation under his tutelage. However, this was around the time of Jin ZiXuan’s birthday and Jin GuangYao was rejected. It was also right around the time Jin GuangShan was to name his heir. Since Meng Yao’s presence would complicate this, Jin GuangShan didn’t want him there.

“After this, he went to seek favor from other gentry Sects, and the Nie Sect accepted him as an assistant. After the Wen attacked Unclear Realm, Meng Yao was also kicked out due to a falling out with the Nie Sect Leader. Following this, Meng Yao roamed the country, and eventually he met Sect Leader Lan, while the other was in hiding, following the attack on Cloud Recesses. Seeing this as an opportunity to gain the favor of another gentry Sect, Meng Yao offered to act as a spy in the Nightless City. However, after the Sunshot Campaign ended, Jin GuangShan actually recognized him as his son, even though it was too late to make him his successor as well. This was only so he could gain even more recognition as someone who participated in war by sending his two sons into battle, one of whom even killed Wen RuoHan himself, Jin GuangShan gained a lot of admiration.

“How does this explain why Su She wants to time travel though?” Jin Ling scoffed, once he was finished explaining.

“It doesn’t, you just love to hear your own voice.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. Jin Ling glared at him pointedly, but Lan JingYi waved it away, continuing: “This is Jin GuangYao’s reason. However, if we follow this logic, something must’ve also happened to Clan Leader Su to want to time travel as well. Perhaps, it was just a deal he made with Jin GuangYao, that once

he goes back, Su MinShan would also gain more respect than he had in the past. Or maybe there was an event he also wants to erase from his past, like Jin GuangYao does.”

“Can’t imagine what it would be.” Jin Ling glared at the subject of their discussion. “After all, as Lan SiZhui said, Clan Leader Su has a high cultivation and isn’t completely stupid. If he just made an effort, he would have easily made a decent name for himself, instead of copying Second Young Master Lan!”

“You—!” Su She snarled, glaring angrily at Jin Ling.

“Are you sure he even has a plan on his own?!” Jin Ling said, raising his voice to be heard over Su She. “After all, he is so inferior since birth, maybe he is so used to it, he doesn’t even have ideas on his own. Maybe he is just doing this to please Jin GuangYao. Really, he complains about being looked down on, yet he acts like he’s below everyone.”

“You!” Su She raged. “Shut up! Just tell me how you did it!”

“What?” Jin Ling looked over with a frown. “You think Jin GuangYao cares for you? Let me tell you, he killed his own brother, father, even his own wife and tried to kill me, his own nephew. Who are you to gain such a man’s favor?”

“He will swear brotherhood with me.” Su She said angrily, not reacting to that these events never even happened yet. “Who are you to judge me? I’ll become the sworn brother of the Jin Sect Leader. Who dares to call me inferior then?!”

“Hah!” Jin Ling laughed, without any amusement. “Let me guess! He will do it if you do this for him; kidnap Lan JingYi, lure us here and get the method of time travel out of us, won’t he?! However, once he learns the method, what will be the point of swearing brotherhood? He will just do it once he traveled back in time. You needn’t to go, since he was going to save you from humiliation in the past, so once he is back, you won’t even remember this promise!”

“You might be cruel like this, MouShi, but not everyone is so evil. I have Lianfang-Zun’s favor; what is there I cannot have?!”

“I’m evil?” Jin Ling glared at him. “If so, what does that make you?”

“Enough of this talk.” Su She snarled, going over and holding his sword back to Lan JingYi’s neck, and in his careless action, also managed to accidentally nick Lan JingYi’s skin. Lan JingYi pulled back in shock right away, blood welling in the shallow cut quickly. “Tell me the method or I’ll kill Feng CiKe.”

“JingYi!” Lan SiZhui cried out, taking a step closer. Jin Ling also stepped forward, his hand clenching around air. Even if he was holding his bow, it would be useless; he had his spiritual powers sealed. If he had his sword, maybe he would be able to fight Su She. After all, Jin Ling was an expert swordsman, receiving the highest education, even if he didn’t like to use the sword all that much. Lan SiZhui frowned at Su She. They glared at each other for a long moment, then Lan SiZhui met Lan JingYi’s eyes. His friend was a little scared, but also in pain. He had to do something. “Fine.” Lan SiZhui said.

“SiZhui!”

“SiZhui, don’t.” Jin Ling growled. Lan SiZhui ignored both his friends’ cries.

“I’ll tell you. But then you let Lan JingYi go.”

“This time, it’s not you who calls the shots, ChunYu-Jun.” Su She told him. “Tell me and I’ll consider keeping him alive.” He pressed the blade harder against Lan JingYi’s neck, drawing even more blood. All air left Lan SiZhui’s lungs in a huff.

“It is a song that brought us here.” He told Su She. At this, the other looked confused.

“A song?”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui said.

“So, it’s like this.” Su She hummed thoughtfully. His grip on his sword slackened a little, drawing away from Lan JingYi’s neck, but it wasn’t enough to attack. Su She looked up after a beat of thinking. “Then, you’ll teach me the song.”

“Are you delusional?!” Jin Ling snapped. “Of course, he won’t teach you the song!”

“Won’t he, MouShi?” Su She glared, pressing the blade against Lan JingYi’s neck once again, though this time Lan JingYi leaned away just enough.

“Stop!” Lan SiZhui pleaded.

“SiZhui, you can’t.” Jin Ling told him quietly.

“I’m not letting JingYi die.”

“I won’t either!” Jin Ling hissed to him. “Are you stupid? Of course, JingYi won’t die. Just give me a minute to think.”

“Think more quickly.” Lan SiZhui told him, watching as Su She pressed the blade closer and Lan JingYi trying to wiggle away. Louder, so Su She could also hear, he called out: “I don’t have my guqin.”

“Fuck!” Jin Ling hissed, and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw his friend deep in thought, trying to come up with a solution while Lan SiZhui attempted to buy some time.

“You think I’m this stupid, ChunYu-Jun?” Su She asked with a frown. “I know just what you can do with your music.”

“How am I to teach you then?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“If it is a guqin score, you can tell me.” Su She said. “After all, I’ve also studied the guqin.”

“Clan Leader Su.” Lan SiZhui began in a flat voice. “To tell you the entire score, it would take days to tell you the whole thing. I’m afraid it is a complicated song. You wouldn’t be



able to remember it all anyways.”

“You—!” Su She sputtered in outrage.

“SiZhui, you really became mean lately.” Lan JingYi told him with a frown. Lan SiZhui saw him also glancing toward Jin Ling, so he must’ve realized they’re buying time to come up with a solution, so Lan SiZhui decided to play along with this act.

“I have to listen to you badmouth the Su Clan all the time.” He said, as if saying: aren’t you hypocritical?

“And you always tell me not to.” Lan JingYi said. “Since when do you agree?”

“I never said I don’t agree.” Lan SiZhui said diplomatically.

“SiZhui!” Lan JingYi exclaimed.

“Enough!” Su She snapped. “Stop talking, both of you!”

“They’re trying to buy time, MinShan.” Came a soft voice from the other side of the cave and all four of them looked over, seeing a person stepping out from the shadows. Seeing him emerge, suddenly Lan SiZhui realized there was a shadow on the far wall he thought was just a rock casting shadow – in reality, that must’ve been another tunnel in the cave, leading to a potential second entrance. Seeing this, Jin Ling, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi exchanged a look before concentrating back on the person.

Jin Ling didn’t seem shocked to see him there. He must’ve suspected the person was here the whole time, he even said earlier: *‘I’m waiting for your master to reveal yourself, so we can talk properly.’* Lan SiZhui however, didn’t expect this, and judging by Lan JingYi’s face, he was also not expecting it.

“He needn’t to recite the score word to word. ChunYu-Jun can just tell us what this score is called and where can we find it. Since they showed up at the lectures first, it is safe to assume they acquired this score in the Cloud Recesses. Since I have a relationship with Sect Leader Lan, it wouldn’t be outrageous to ask for his help in this matter.”

“Lianfang-Zun, you’re right.” Su She agreed.

“What are you planning to do?” Jin Ling asked Jin GuangYao without a pause, scowling. “What, you’re going to go to Lan XiChen and tell him you were in on it the whole time? You’re going to tell him we asked for your help in this?!”

“ZeWu-Jun is clearly fond of the three of you.” Jin GuangYao inclined his head. “Naturally, he would accept the help of a family member who can also read between the lines. Don’t worry, A-Ling, we will definitely find it.”

“Let me say this, *uncle*.” Jin Ling sneered, glaring at Jin GuangYao. “Lan XiChen would definitely not let you get your hands on this. We’ve already warned him of your malicious intent.”

“Perhaps.” Jin GuangYao hummed. “However, Sect Leader Lan is smart. He can distinguish past from future. Those things you warned him about, none of them happened yet.” He said. “I’m a different person than who you described him.” There was a pause, while Jin Ling glared at Jin GuangYao.

“Don’t you think this is also something he would not want to reveal to an outsider? Lan XiChen might be too trusting, but what you would ask of him is also a GusuLan secret. He won’t reveal it to you, just because you appear to want to help.” Jin Ling told him. “And also, this is music. Lan WangJi is one of the most accomplished disciples in the Cloud Recesses, famous for his musical cultivation. Why would they need your help?” Jin Ling scoffed.

“A-Ling, naturally, ZeWu-Jun would want to help. After all, there is currently tension between the Lan Sect and the Jin Sect. Since this is the case, wouldn’t it be bad if he said no to the Jin Sect’s request, even if it’s about one of his Sect’s secrets?”

“You’re not the Sect Leader though.” Jin Ling told him. “So, if you think refusing you would be like refusing the Jin Sect, you’re delusional.”

“Mn.” Jin GuangYao smiled that small, dimpled smile of his that promised nice words but daggers in the back also. “However, if he knew this was the Sect Leader’s request through me…”

“He would want confirmation.” Jin Ling said with a frown.

“And Sect Leader Jin would give it to him.”

“What are you talking about?” Jin Ling asked, exchanging looks with the rest of them, confused.

“Naturally, Sect Leader Jin also knows about this.” Jin GuangYao said. “Otherwise, who do you think gave me the authority to investigate this matter?” This stunned all of them into silence. “A-Ling, did you think I didn’t tell father about this? He wants this knowledge just as much as me.”

“But why?” Jin Ling scoffed. “I know why you want it. I may even understand Su MinShan. But what would Jin GuangShan gain?”

“What would Sect Leader Jin gain by the knowledge of time travel?” Jin GuangYao cocked an eyebrow. Jin Ling frowned at the ground as he thought.

“Jin Ling?” Lan JingYi asked, sounding a little scared. Lan SiZhui felt the same; what would Sect Leader Jin gain by this?

“The implications are endless.” Jin Ling said. “He could go back and erase any evidence of having those affairs he had all the time. He could end an entire generation of Jin Sect Heirs just like this. He could alter the outcome of war. Knowing how it would end, he could even participate the most, gaining such high status, he would be a celebrated hero even centuries after his death. By the knowledge of past deals and mistakes, he could raise the Jin Sect above all, become the absolute power in the cultivation world. Jin GuangShan with the

knowledge of time travel would be an unparalleled force. Think Wen RuoHan but less bloodthirsty.” He told the Lan.

“Sect Leader Jin is indeed incredibly interested.” Jin GuangYao inclined his head. Jin Ling looked up at him sharply.

“It doesn’t matter though, because he will never get his hands on this knowledge. Neither will you.” With this, he picked his bow off his back and pulled out that lone arrow he had, aiming it at Jin GuangYao.

However, the next moment, the Sects arrived.

## Reminiscence IV.

Several things happened at once.

They heard footsteps approaching from behind them, from the first entrance where Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui arrived. Jin GuangYao's eyes widened, and he drew his flexible sword from somewhere, leaping towards Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui.

"Watch out!" Lan JingYi called out in warning. Not expecting Jin GuangYao to also attack, Jin Ling was caught in surprise, so Lan SiZhui pushed him out of Jin GuangYao's way, both of them landing on their sides from the momentum. Lan SiZhui choked back a cry as the hit jostled his wounds and he hissed in pain that shot down his back. However, Jin GuangYao turned back to attack them again, and Jin Ling pushed Lan SiZhui away. He picked up the arrow that fell with him, notched it and shooting it at Jin GuangYao before the other man reached them.

Fortunately, his aim was true and Jin GuangYao didn't expect the attack. Jin GuangYao didn't notice it in time and the arrow embedded itself into his shoulder.

Three people cried out then: Jin GuangYao in pain, Su She in fright and Lan JingYi in alarm. Hearing his brother's voice, Lan SiZhui looked over, seeing Su She pulled him up from the ground and was holding Lan JingYi in front of him as if a living shield. Lan SiZhui seeing this, his eyes widened, but he didn't hesitate. He licked his lips and began to whistle.

Resentful energy reacted surprisingly quick and eager to Lan SiZhui's summons. The resentful energy rose around and from inside Su She, causing him to freeze up. Sensing the movement and hold slacking on him, Lan JingYi quickly knocked the sword out from Su She's hand, then twisted out of his frozen hold.

Before they could take a breath, Jin Ling took hold of Lan SiZhui's arm, pulling him onto his feet and over to where Lan JingYi stood away from Su She, watching him in distrust. As the two arrived, Jin Ling didn't hesitate, leaning down and picking up Su She's sword. Lan SiZhui hurried over to Lan JingYi, taking hold of him, about to ask if he was alright, but he never got the chance.

Just as Jin Ling picked up the sword, several people arrived to the chamber. Jin Ling turned, holding up the sword to Su She's throat as he took in the sight. Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui also turned to the newcomers. All major Sects and several bigger Clans represented themselves, although in smaller numbers than in the last battle. They had their swords drawn as they arrived, looking around frenzied. They must've heard the fight just now and wanted to join. However, by then Su She was in their custody, Jin GuangYao collapsed onto the ground in front of the entrance, half sitting up, clutching at his arm, where Jin Ling's arrow pierced his shoulder, glaring at the four of them. However, as the Sects arrived, he was quick to stumble up and onto his feet, hurrying over and stopping in front of his father.

"Father, you came!" He said, relieved. "We have just managed to subdue the criminals when they suddenly made a move – just as you arrived, we lost control of the situation." He fell to

his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground. “Forgive me! I have managed to lose our advantage!”

Lan SiZhui looked over the assemble. All the four Sects were here, facing them just like in Nightless City, except now it was only the three of them against the lot of them. Lan SiZhui was worried that this time around, they wouldn’t listen. Lan XiChen was watching them intently. Lan SiZhui wanted to greet him, but this was not the time.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui called over quietly. “What are we going to do?”

“What do you think?” Jin Ling asked, also quiet. “I’m not letting him get away with this.” With this, he raised his voice. “Liar!”

To this, those who had been concentrated on Jin GuangYao’s report, also turned to them. Jin GuangShan looked furious. Lan XiChen had his eyebrows drawn together, like he didn’t understand the situation at all.

“MouShi! This is outrageous!”

“I agree!” Jin Ling said arrogantly. “Have your son told you what happened in the garden on his wedding celebration?”

“I have.” Jin ZiXuan said, stepping forward, out of the crowd. Jin Ling’s eyes widened at his presence.

“What are you doing here?!” He demanded.

“Explaining the situation.” Jin ZiXuan told him pointedly, then turned to his father. “Father, this is definitely the same uniform I saw back then.” Jin GuangShan glanced over and worked his jaw, most likely deciding whether to proceed with this, instead of addressing Lan SiZhui’s escape. Surprisingly, Nie MingJue stepped forward.

“Young Master Jin, on the discussion, you said a person in Su disciple clothes attacked you. Is it this person?”

“Indeed.” Jin ZiXuan said. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling shared a look, Lan SiZhui’s confused, Jin Ling’s surprised. They looked over at Su She, who indeed, wore his Clan’s uniform now. It resembled the Lan Sect’s, although the style was a little different and the fabric most certainly cheaper. It was also not as elegantly decorated as the Lan Sect’s robes, but regardless, the style of the embroidery resembled the flowing clouds the Lan Sect favored to weave into their fabric.

“Seeing that it could be anyone from the Su Clan, you also said once we find this person, you can prove it.” Nie MingJue said. “What is this proof?” There was a pause, then Jin Ling called over:

“JingYi.” Lan JingYi looked over. Jin Ling motioned with his head to come over. Once Lan JingYi did, Jin Ling handed him over the sword he had been holding against Su She’s throat, now Lan JingYi took over the sword from Jin Ling, holding it against Su She’s neck. Jin Ling

then moved in front of Su She and with a sneer, ripped the front of his clothes. Stepping away, he revealed the bruising Huangfeng caused. Seeing the wound, Lan SiZhui was surprised Su She wasn't in more pain. The spiritual energy caused a huge bruise on Su She's chest, a harsh red line in the middle, purple and blue hued bruising spreading across his whole torso.

"When I encountered the assassin in the Jin Sect's gardens, I ward off his attack from Jin ZiXuan by attacking him with Huangfeng." Jin Ling continued, holding up his bow. "Those of the Jin Sect are by now familiar with the injuries Huangfeng can cause. I dare anyone to come take a closer look; does this look like the same bruising?"

At this, several people stepped closer, though they didn't dare come close enough to be in reach. However, Clan Leader Yao, who was also present, squinted his eyes looking at the injury, then turned back to Jin GuangShan. Lan SiZhui also looked over, seeing some darker veins around the bruising, which would have been usual. However, this was suspicious, looked a lot like a person who encountered strong resentful energy.

"Sect Leader Jin, this, indeed, looks like the bruising caused by MouShi's spiritual tool!" Clan Leader Yao said.

"So it is." Jin GuangShan said lowly, glancing over at Jin ZiXuan. "But how do we know it didn't happen just now? After all, A-Yao said him and Clan Leader Su subdued the criminals just now."

"How can it be?" Clan Leader Yao asked, and right away, Jin GuangShan looked annoyed by this, clearly wanting people to also question Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan's word. "This bruising looks at least a week old, if not older. Sect Leader Jin, but you know this; if this was a fresh bruise, it wouldn't be blue already, but only red just yet."

Jin GuangShan glared at Clan Leader Yao for a long moment, then pursed his lips, and said:

"Clan Leader Yao is correct of course. Only there is very poor lightning in this cave, it was hard to see from where I'm standing. I appreciate Clan Leader Yao's contribution. Please, come back now, away from the criminals." As if Clan Leader Yao just realized how close he was, he quickly returned. Jin GuangShan took a pause, while his sons were both looking at him, waiting for judgement. Then, he said: "In that case, congratulations, A-Yao. You have also, unknowingly, captured the assassin who was trying to end ZiXuan's life."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Jin Ling grumbled, then spoke up: "Don't praise him too fast!" Jin Ling snapped. "Before this was revealed just now, they've also worked together. Or did you miss him saying 'we' when referring to the people catching us?!"

"Yes, I've heard it too!"

"That's what he said!" Some disciples agreed. Jin GuangYao looked over at his father with a desperate look on his face.

"Ah, father, that is true." Jin GuangYao admitted. "However, before this was revealed just now, I didn't know! When I arrived to Moling, I asked for the Su Clan's help in searching for

the criminals, since they're the Clan overlooking the area. I didn't know the Clan Leader was also the assassin who made an attempt on ZiXuan's life! Father, you tasked me in Koi Tower with catching these people for making an attempt on ZiXuan's life, how could I have known?!"

"Lianfang-Zun!" Su She called out, sounding betrayed. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look behind Jin Ling's back. Was this Jin Ling's plan, making Jin GuangYao beg for his father's forgiveness, with this, exposing his real personality to Su She, making the other man confess to their collaboration?

"What my son is saying makes sense." Jin GuangShan said sternly. "There's no need to condemn him for this."

"Slippery fish." Jin Ling muttered under his breath angrily. Lan SiZhui watched the people in front of them, then looked over at Su She, still exposed. With a lull in the conversation, he decided to try another angle.

Lan SiZhui also noticed something. He had felt it upon coming closer to the cave as well, but here it was even more prominent. There was resentful energy in this cave, this was why resentful energy reacted to his call so eagerly. Looking over at the water, Lan SiZhui also noted it was eerie still, the surface mirroring the light of the campfire, now multiple torches as well that the Sects carried.

Thinking back to their escape from Koi Tower, Lan SiZhui also noted something strange back then. While he whistled and used resentful energy against Su She back then as well, he was able to do so just as easily as now. However, even though he whistled then too, there was barely any activity when they faced Li XingXu. But now, again, against Su She, this worked again. And then there was the black lines around his bruising...

"Is Young Master Wei present?" He asked. At this, everyone paused and looked over at him in confusion. Lan SiZhui looked over the people.

He needn't to look too much, because the next moment, a dark-clothed figure stepped forward, next to where Sect Leader Jiang stood. "I'm here, SiZhui!" Wei WuXian grinned, raising his hand and waving. "It's good to see you!"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, sharing the sentiment.

"What is it, SiZhui?" Jin Ling asked him over his shoulder, once the commotion was over.

"I have a theory." Lan SiZhui told them. "Young Master Wei," he called out, "do you have your flute with you?" To this, Wei WuXian looked over at Jiang FengMian, then pressed his lips together and shook his head. Lan SiZhui nodded. "Then I'll have to do it." He said, then licked his lips and began to whistle softly. At this, several people were alarmed, but they didn't advance, seeing Su She still in the three's grip, they didn't want him to escape.

As Lan SiZhui's whistles called forth resentful energy, it gently manifested. First, it came from the water of the lake, appearing as a gentle mist or steam rising from the surface of the water. However, it also began to manifest around Su She. Lan SiZhui watched, his brows

furrowing. He stopped whistling and the resentful energy settled, Lan SiZhui having been just shy of actually summoning it, it dissipated softly.

“Yin Iron?” Wei WuXian voiced and they all looked over at his thoughtful expression.

“A-Xian, what is it? Lan SiZhui randomly started whistling, not even giving an explanation, we were not fighting, what happened?” Jiang FengMian asked. Wei WuXian was about to answer, however, before he could, Lan XiChen looked over at Lan SiZhui, then around the cave. He then tilted his head a little towards one of his disciples.

“WangYu, is this the same cave?” He asked softly, but loud enough to be heard. The disciple at his shoulder nodded.

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.”

“Sect Leader Lan, do you know this place?” Wei WuXian frowned, also looking around. Lan XiChen seemed thoughtful, even as he began to talk slowly.

“This mountain... A few years ago, just as the Lan guest lectures began, we received a request for aid from Su MuShi, because some of their disciples went missing in the back mountains of the Su Clan. I tasked WangJi to help out, for I was not available because of the lectures. WangJi investigated and found the mountain infected with the Yin Iron’s resentful energy. It turned out, where the Yin Iron was kept on the back mountains of the Cloud Recesses, there were also several streams starting from there. These mountains are all in connection, so the leaking resentful energy of the Yin Iron got this far due to the water originating from the Yin Iron’s hiding place.

“This is a well-known hunting ground for our disciples. Both Lan and Su disciples train here, so it was not unusual to come here. However, they didn’t expect this resentful energy. WangJi later reported that the mountains were covered in fog and it also had malicious intent. Him and the disciples he took with him came upon a cave in the side of a mountain where the resentful energy concentrated. Coming inside, they discovered a lake. Their investigation revealed that the water of the lake was severely infected with the Yin Iron’s resentful energy, though none of its killing intent. To touch the water is as if to interact with the Yin Iron.

“In the lake...” He trailed off, his expression one of grief. “I suspect, the bodies are still inside. The disciples night-hunting here must’ve thought to camp here for the night. The mountain water around here is known to be clear and not causing any infection. However, this lake is different. When they went to fill up their waterskins, the disciples were attacked by the resentful energy and fell in. There were four bodies found in the water.” He nodded towards the lake. “However, WangJi was looking for five disciples, so when they discovered the second entrance, they headed that way. There, indeed, they found the fifth disciple. Since he was safe to take, they took his body to the Cloud Recesses for this to be investigated.”

“Ah, was this...?” Wei WuXian asked and Lan XiChen looked over, nodding.

“Young Master Wei also remembers. We discovered that this person turned into a puppet, however, his killing intent was missing, seeing this resentful energy is just a byproduct of the Yin Iron. We thought, since the lakes around Cloud Recesses are safe, the strong positive



energy of the mountain purged the surrounding lakes as well. As it had, but it seems this lake is still affected because of the corpses inside.”

“Sect Leader Lan, while this information is interesting, why was this revealed to us just now?” Clan Leader Yao asked, confused.

“When SiZhui called for the resentful energy just now, only two things reacted.” Wei WuXian said. “The water of the lake... And Clan Leader Su’s body.”

“He is infected by the resentful energy?” Someone asked. Wei WuXian nodded. “So what? We’ve already discovered he is the assassin, why is this important all of the sudden?”

“While I was in prison, a person died.” Lan SiZhui said. At this, Lan JingYi looked over sharply, and Jin Ling looked over with a confused expression. However, Lan SiZhui was watching Su She. “She was attacked by resentful energy.”

“We know this, ChunYu-Jun.” Jin GuangShan said darkly. He paused, then turned to the rest. “Friends, I haven’t revealed this to you because I wanted to address this on the conference following ZiXuan’s wedding. However, this was delayed because of MouShi and ChunYu-Jun’s escape. It is indeed true. ChunYu-Jun was imprisoned with another criminal from the Wen Sect, who was a lowlife and a no one. One day, we discovered that ChunYu-Jun was able to summon resentful energy by only humming his deadly tunes, and with this, he also killed this criminal. Because of this, I have been in discussion with my elders and guards regarding how to handle the situation. It is clear ChunYu-Jun cannot be trusted even in prison. I’m afraid, this might mean we will have no choice...”

“Jin GuangShan!” Jin Ling snapped, suddenly furious. Jin GuangShan turned to him, scandalized to have been cut off so rudely. “Are you serious right now?! After everything, you have the face to stand here and still advocate to have SiZhui killed?!”

“Killed?!” Lan XiChen asked, alarmed, turning to Jin GuangShan as well. “Sect Leader Jin, surely, this isn’t what you meant?!”

“Friends... This would have, naturally, been discussed.” Jin GuangShan tried to placate.

“Despite this, why is a prisoner’s death relevant now?” Someone from the Jiang Sect asked. “Surely, ChunYu-Jun isn’t trying to hint this was brother Wei’s doing?”

“Not at all.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I’ll tell you. This prisoner died because of the summoning of the resentful energy. However, this wasn’t me, and we all know it couldn’t have been brother Wei either.”

“Why should we believe you?” A Jin disciple asked with a frown. It might’ve been fifth twice removed cousin. “Naturally, you’re going to say it wasn’t you.”

“I used to be a Lan disciple.” Lan SiZhui told them. “I’m not afraid to own up to my crimes.”

“That’s true.” Lan JingYi added. “Once we picked apples from the apple trees – this isn’t even a crime, but he felt so bad, he went and kneeled in front of the Lanshi for three days

before Grandmaster Lan threatened to punish him for being an obstacle in other's way to class."

Lan SiZhui bit his cheeks, holding himself back from snorting at the memory, then got hold of himself and continued. "If I believed it was me who did it, who killed Wang LingJiao, I wouldn't deny it. However, some time before the prisoner, Wang LingJiao's death, another prisoner, General Wu asked me what I was humming while I was not aware I was humming. It might've been the lack of care that made me do this, so I dismissed the entire thing. However, at the time, I asked General Wu what I was humming. He repeated it to me. The score was what you heard just now, to call forth resentful energy. However, the tune he hummed back was incorrect. At the time, I assumed he didn't hear it right or couldn't replicate it correctly.

"Then, some time later, General Wu was already dead from the injuries inflicted by the guards. It was just me and Wang LingJiao in the prison. At the time I didn't realize that resentful energy was present in the prison. Lady Wang was complaining for days that she heard me humming, while at times I was unconscious, or otherwise made sure not to hum at all. But she kept complaining, even calling for the guard, because resentful energy attacked her.

"She couldn't have just been hearing voices, since there was a witness. Since she brought up General Wu also complained about my humming, this must've been indeed me humming, only I didn't realize. Several times I woke to Lady Wang crying out, wanting the humming to stop, and the resentful energy attacking her. By then, I also noticed the resentful energy rising.

"Resentful energy like this... There are only a handful of explanations that make sense. First, there was the issue of the presence of it. I can summon resentful energy through whistling because I use the old Qin language's notes, although it's not too powerful, seeing it's not played on a qin. For it to manifest as it just had, there has to be a significant amount of resentful energy. Here, it makes sense since the corpses are still in the water. In the prison, I theorized it was either because a Yin Iron shard was present, which was not, or because many people died there, just recently General Wu as well." Lan SiZhui said, but then, Wei WuXian said:

"Even with those people dead, the resentful energy wouldn't rise without reason. It is present in the Burial Mounds because tens of thousands died there, this was what it would take, not merely a handful of people in a prison. This is impossible without a reason. The reason could be only two things; either there was a tool the resentful energy reacted to, but we've established it would need to be a Yin Iron shard and it was impossible to have such thing in there, especially since the shards are destroyed. The other possibility is that someone called for it who still had their spiritual powers and used their own body as a spiritual tool to enhance the effect of the Qin language." He concluded and Lan SiZhui also nodded.

"I also thought so. For this reason, I don't believe it was me who summoned the resentful energy. I also had no reason to kill Lady Wang. She was an unpleasant person and attacked us at Lotus Pier, but she was already being punished in the prison. Despite past misgivings, I'm

not a spiteful person. If someone gets the punishment they deserve for their crimes, I'm not going to interfere and rule out even more punishment just to take my personal revenge."

Wei WuXian hummed thoughtfully, and said: "However, this means another person had to be there to call for and also control the resentful energy. The only people capable of this had been established to not have done this. Besides, I didn't even realize that Wang LingJiao was still alive. I thought she—" He cut himself off, then shook his head.

"Exactly." Lan SiZhui agreed. "However, we also know about another person who had been experimenting with resentful energy and also my spiritual tool, Hudie as well. Who knew enough about Qin language to be able to replicate my scores, however badly, and know that Qin language needed to be enhanced with spiritual power to have an effect without a guqin." At this, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi also seemed to understand.

"Ah, this makes sense!" Lan JingYi nodded, looking thoughtful. "After the Jin attacked you in the Wen village, your guqin and sword were taken. Me and Jin Ling met a few days ago and went to the Wen village to look for you, but there they said the Wen had been taken by the Jin. We went to Qiongqi to see if you were there, but only saw two people coming in and out of a watchtower, once arriving with a guqin that I recognized as Hudie. At the time, we didn't know, but this was when they were testing to see if they could summon the Stygian Tiger Amulet from Hudie. But then, the Crowd Hunt began, and they had to return your weapons. You reported, after you received Hudie, it was leaking the resentful energies of the Stygian Tiger Amulet. We suspected at the time Jin Ling's relative was after the Yin Iron shard for some reason."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded.

"So, Su MinShan was actually experimenting on Hudie to call forth the Yin Iron." Jin Ling frowned.

"At the time, he must not have known how I used musical cultivation to control resentful energy, only after hearing it since then, did he learn."

"ChunYu-Jun, I don't see what point you're trying to make." Clan Leader Yao spoke up. "Sect Leader Jin already revealed he knew you used the Stygian Tiger Amulet. Isn't this issue already solved?"

"How can it be?" Jin Ling asked. "If Sect Leader Jin knew about this earlier, why did he sneak around, trying to get the Yin Iron from SiZhui through these shady people?"

"MouShi, watch your mouth!" Someone called out. "Accusing Sect Leader Jin, aren't you too brave?"

"I'm a wanted criminal, do you really think I care about offending Sect Leader Jin at this point?!" Jin Ling snapped. "If Jin GuangShan knew about SiZhui owning part of the Yin Iron, this was a concern of the cultivation world. Yet he didn't even ask, kept it quiet until the confrontation at Burial Mounds, does this not seem suspicious to you all?!"

“Well, I suppose since at the time Sect Leader Jin thought ChunYu-Jun was still part of the Lan Sect, he couldn’t have confronted him about it casually.” Clan Leader Yao said. “Not everyone is scheming, MouShi. Sect Leader Jin is an important political person with delicate connections to other Sects, who would accuse him of being shady with this? Doesn’t it make sense he was instead being respectful?”

“Why would it?” Jin Ling asked. “If he suspected SiZhui had the shard and also thought he was part of the Lan Sect, he could’ve just confronted Lan XiChen about it. As far as I know, and I hope Sect Leader Lan can confirm this to me, since this information would be relevant to us, Jin GuangShan never confronted him about this.” He looked pointedly at Lan XiChen, who inclined his head.

“I wouldn’t have kept quiet about something like this.” He agreed.

“But then, why would you think, if Sect Leader Jin never revealed this knowledge until the confrontation at Burial Mounds, that he still wanted to get to this shard of the Yin Iron ChunYu-Jun owned?” Someone else asked.

“You’re telling me if you knew someone had a shard of the Yin Iron, you wouldn’t want to either reveal this to others to deal with it, or deal with it yourself?” Jin Ling asked, looking around. “Or, knowing how dangerous Wen RuoHan became with just a couple of shards, you would sit on this knowledge until it became relevant?”

“The political landscape at the time was fragile due to several Sects and Clans having lost their homes and people.” Clan Leader Yao reasoned. “How could one bring this up in such circumstances?”

“How could they not?” Jin Ling countered. “If the political landscape is fragile, that’s even more reason to archive peace. The Yin Iron and those who wield it are dangerous; why would you keep a force like this unaddressed?” He paused. “Besides this, don’t you think Sect Leader Jin can address the most uncomfortable topics on discussions without an issue, but not bring this up, a topic that could threaten the forementioned fragile peace that descended on the cultivation world?”

“If this meant a fight with the Lan Sect, naturally, not!” Someone reasoned.

“But why would anyone assume this meant a fight?” Jin Ling frowned. “The Lan Sect was supposed to be righteous, if they had a Yin Iron shard, would they not hand over if addressed?”

“If the Lan Sect knew about having a demonic cultivator in their lines, why would they keep quiet about it though?” Someone else asked. “After all, they were supposed to be righteous, why would they not tell us, keeping the fragile peace, and dealing with it together?”

“Maybe they wanted to deal with it themselves.” Someone else answered. “After all, they are a righteous and powerful Sect, even in their beaten state, they’re the most capable of handling such matters.”

“And who knows,” another person agreed with this, “maybe Sect Leader Jin didn’t bring it up, exactly because he thought the same thing! After all, why confront the Lan Sect about this and disturb the peace, when it seems like they’re handling this just fine?”

“Does it look like they handle it just fine though?” Someone asked. “After all, ChunYu-Jun used this tool to attack Jin disciples in the Wen village; surely, this is enough motivation to have Sect Leader Jin confront Sect Leader Lan about it, even offer help if needed!”

“Doesn’t this make sense?” Jin Ling nodded, agreeing. “Jin GuangShan knew about the Yin Iron shard since the Wen village, yet he said nothing, even though his own disciples had been killed there. Why would he do this? As I see this, instead of choosing the righteous path, he went sneaking around, trying to steal it from him through shady methods, going as far as hiring Su MinShan.”

“MouShi, what you’re saying makes sense,” Jin GuangYao spoke up unexpectedly, “however, you’re leaving out a possibility.”

“What?” Jin Ling scoffed at him. Jin GuangShan threw a warning look towards his son, but the other didn’t listen.

“You’re basing this on the assumption that Sect Leader Lan is completely trustworthy. If Sect Leader Jin didn’t trust him, or his righteousness, how could he confront him about this and hope in a good outcome?”

“GuangYao!” Jin GuangShan glared at him. “Watch how you speak about other people!”

“Father, I’m aware that you want to keep a good relationship with the Lan Sect, especially seeing the tension between our Sects lately, but isn’t this just another example of the same thing? Sect Leader Lan had been supportive of Lan SiZhui’s actions this whole time. Who knows how he got bewitched, the point is, how could Sect Leader Jin trust his judgement when it came to this matter?”

“What is he doing?” Lan JingYi asked quietly.

“He’s pushing for another war.” Jin Ling answered darkly. “Since it is obvious he won’t get at the music score through Lan XiChen’s trust, seeing that they are not even close but begin to become on opposite sides, he gave this up and instead going to try to take the knowledge by force. After all, if the Sects go against Lan XiChen, and he loses, the Lan Sect’s treasures will be reviewed and distributed, including the library’s contents as well.”

At this, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui looked over with wide eyes.

“He would go this far?” Lan SiZhui asked. Jin Ling shrugged one shoulder, glaring at Jin GuangYao and not looking at the two of them.

“Look what he did to Nie MingJue in the future. How far is too far for him? Look, he’s not even having a hard time. Everyone knows Lan XiChen supported you in the past, nobody is going to question it. They will, however, question how involved he became with your crimes. Once they find out...”

“I’ve left the Sect though.” Lan SiZhui said, shocked.

“Does it matter? In the eye of the cultivation world, we’re all close to Lan XiChen. You needn’t to be his disciple to be his friend.” He paused, then louder said: “What does Sect Leader Lan has to do with anything? You all assume he knew about the Yin Iron, have you confirmed it?” He looked over the people, who seemed to find merit at this. “So, Jin GuangYao can claim all he wants that Jin GuangShan didn’t trust Lan XiChen, but how would they even know he knew about this, unless they confronted him, which they didn’t? I say this makes them look even more suspicious.”

“What are you hinting at?” Jin GuangShan finally spoke up, frowning.

“Sect Leader Jin, I’m not hinting at anything.” Jin Ling told him, looking him in the eyes without blinking. “I’m asking you. Did you or did you not approve of Jin GuangYao and Su MinShan experimenting on SiZhui’s guqin before the Crowd Hunt?” To this, there was a long silence

“Besides, who is most trustworthy, Sect Leader Lan or Sect Leader Jin?” Wei WuXian unexpectedly spoke up. “After all, according to Sect Leader Jin, Lan SiZhui was imprisoned with a nobody lowlife from the Wen Sect. According to Lan SiZhui, this was Wang LingJiao. Sect Leader Jin, Wang LingJiao was Wen Chao’s mistress and everyone knew she was an important figure of the Sunshot Campaign. Why was she not executed with the rest of the leaders of the Wen Sect?”

“Sect Leader Jin, is this true?!” Nie MingJue also turned to the man. “Wang LingJiao might’ve only been Wen Chao’s whore, but she also participated actively in the war. Was she not the one to instigate the attack on Lotus Pier?!”

“Ah, of course...” Jin GuangShan said flustered. “Friends, don’t be angry. We kept her alive to find out if more leaders were still hiding, naturally, once we figured it out, we would’ve executed her as discussed.”

“Was the same true to General Wu and the others, who died before him in your prison?” Lan SiZhui asked with a frown. Several Sect Leaders looked over at him, then to Jin GuangShan.

“Jin GuangShan, just what goes on in that Sect of yours?!” Nie MingJue asked angrily. “In Nightless City, we agreed to the conditions of handling the remaining Wen, yet you hid not one, but several leaders in your prison, what was the point of this?! You say XiChen is not trustworthy, yet you’re the one who makes such shady deals behind our backs?”

“Sect Leader Jin, this decision was made in Nightless City by the four Sects.” Jiang FengMian also spoke up now. “You also agreed to this. Why did you go against your own words and kept them alive?”

“Naturally, this was for all our benefits.” Jin GuangShan said, sounding a little upset, but hiding it behind the mask of a politician. “There were documents in Wen RuoHan’s office that needed to be explored, but unfortunately, a thief stole them and so we had to investigate like this. What if we found out something significant this way? We couldn’t waste such opportunity.”

“But Sect Leader Jin, why hide this from us?” Jiang FengMian asked. “If you explained the situation, surely, we would’ve understood and could’ve come up with a solution.”

“Ah, Sect Leader Jiang, the truth is rather complicated.” Jin GuangYao said, bowing to the other Sect Leader clumsily with his arm hanging down because of Jin Ling’s arrow. Jin GuangShan looked at him sharply, which made Jin GuangYao bow his head.

“What does your son mean, Sect Leader Jin? Is this another one of your doing? Or Jin GuangYao’s scheming?” Jiang FengMian asked, sounding confused. Jin GuangShan glared at his son, then scoffed.

“Since he began to speak already, why won’t he tell you?” Jin GuangShan said, looking up and at the wall across him, not looking at anyone. Jin GuangYao hesitated for only a moment.

“Sect Leader Jiang, it’s not befitting to talk about this...”

“Explain.” Nie MingJue snapped. Jin GuangYao looked over at him and pressed his lips together.

“Since Sect Leader Nie demands... I’ll speak.” He bowed awkwardly towards the other man as well. “The truth is, we knew who the thieves were.” He said. Lan XiChen’s brows furrowed, but otherwise didn’t react.

“You did?” Jiang FengMian frowned. “Then why didn’t you say, so they could be arrested, the documents returned?”

“Because, the truth is, Sect Leader Jiang, the thieves were important people. We didn’t want to cause a scandal with this. By the time we could’ve discussed this privately, the documents have been burned already, the evidence destroyed. Seeing that Sect Leader Jin didn’t want to accuse these people unnecessarily without a proof, we decided to act instead.”

“Who are these people that Sect Leader Jin is so careful?” Clan Leader Yao asked, thought a moment, then looked over at Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui. “Was it these young heroes back then as well? Their crimes really go that far back?”

Jin GuangYao didn’t answer. Lan XiChen pursed his lips. Lan SiZhui hoped he wouldn’t reveal the real identities of the thieves as himself and Nie MingJue, since there was no need – Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui’s reputation could take this.

“Whatever the reason,” Nie MingJue began, glancing over at the three of them before returning his attention to Jin GuangShan, “this was still against the pact we’ve made. Regardless of who were the thieves, this could’ve been discussed privately and agreed. Going behind people’s back, this just makes me believe these people’s story more.”

“Naturally, Sect Leader Nie would believe it.” Jin GuangShan said offhandedly. However, if he didn’t want to draw attention on his involvement with the documents, Nie MingJue couldn’t react too harshly.

“This, on top of the previous accusations, Sect Leader Jin, don’t you think it’s time to explain yourself properly?” Jin Ling asked, glaring at the other man.

“MouShi, what you say makes sense, about these previous accusations.” Clan Leader Yao petted his beard thoughtfully before Jin GuangShan could answer. “However, don’t you think it would also make sense for a son to aspire to impress his father? Jin GuangYao was experimenting on ChunYu-Jun’s Hudie, wouldn’t it be logical if he did this so he could present the Stygian Tiger Amulet to Jin GuangShan, so Sect Leader Jin wouldn’t have to confront Sect Leader Lan about this?”

“And SiZhui wouldn’t notice his tool going missing?” Jin Ling scoffed. “Wouldn’t he also report it going missing to the Lan Sect Leader, whom he had a good relationship with at the time, since Lan XiChen was also hiding the fact of SiZhui’s parting? Even if Jin GuangShan only assumed at the time that Lan SiZhui was still part of the Lan Sect, knowing that Jin GuangYao took his tool without his consent, it would anger Jin GuangShan instead, not impress him, for he would need to bring this shameful fact up, no matter what he wanted to do with the shard.”

“That’s true!” Clan Leader Yao exclaimed, turning to Jin GuangYao. “Young Master Jin, why did you do it then?”

At this, Jin GuangYao seemed angry, and didn’t answer.

“Also, this further proves Jin GuangYao and Su MinShan had been in contact way before the incident at the wedding celebration.” Jin Ling continued. “What motivation would a Lan familial Clan Leader have to assassinate the Jin Sect heir? At the Jin Sect, we learn about the history and how Sect Heirs kill each other for the Leader position. Is it so unimaginable that Jin GuangYao would also do this?”

“That is very true!” Clan Leader Yao agreed enthusiastically. Jin Ling looked back at Lan SiZhui and rolled his eyes before turning back to the Sects.

“Also, Jin GuangYao and Su MinShan worked together on extracting Stygian Tiger Amulet from Hudie. Su MinShan was also likely the one to kill Wang LingJiao in the prison. Lan SiZhui, tell us now, where were you kept while you were imprisoned in the Koi Tower?”

Lan SiZhui frowned, not quite understanding why Jin Ling wanted him to say this. But he didn’t object and told them.

“I was kept in an underground prison. We left Jin Ling at the regular prison, then Li XingXu, the head of the Jin Sect’s guards, led me even further into the Koi Tower. It was at a very sparsely lived area that I was held. There was only an office above ground. Once they took me through there, they opened a sliding door towards the back, revealing a staircase down to the cells.”

“I can also testify.” Lan XiChen unexpectedly said, cold. “Although Sect Leader Jin led me believe the office was a seclusion room and SiZhui was held up there, not in a hidden underground prison.” Here, he looked at Jin GuangShan sharply. Jin GuangShan pressed his lips together, but didn’t answer.



“This is a place I’ve never even heard of and I’ve lived in Koi Tower my whole life.” Jin Ling said.

“It is a place where we keep the more dangerous prisoners.” Jin GuangShan said. “Naturally, a child wouldn’t have heard of it.”

“Do you also keep this a secret from gentry children?” Wei WuXian asked, and nobody understood why.

“Why should they know about it?” Jin GuangYao asked, confused.

“Why keep it a secret?” Jin Ling challenged further. “Lan XiChen knew Lan SiZhui was in prison. Why hide this fact and make it look like he was held in seclusion?”

“MouShi, you don’t know this, because you’re just a disciple. However, every Sect has secrets.” Jin GuangShan said. “Just look at what Sect Leader Lan said just now. The Lan Sect knew that the Yin Iron was affecting the surrounding area years ago, yet they didn’t tell this to the Clans of the surrounding area, nor did they warn the other Sects. This is their right as a cultivation Sect. Having a prison dedicated to criminals who cannot be normally contained, isn’t it the Jin Sect’s right?”

“Sure.” Jin Ling told him. “All I’m saying is that your shady businesses are piling up. However, this isn’t the point I’m trying to make.” Jin Ling said. “The point is, it seems only the close associates of the Jin Sect know about this prison. Let me ask you this then, how come Su MinShan was down there, killing a person? How did he come to know about this prison? How did he even find it?”

“How did you, by the way?” A Jin disciple asked.

“I told him where it is.” Jin ZiXuan said without hesitation.

“You did?” Wei WuXian asked, sounding confused. Jin ZiXuan frowned at him, but before he could answer, his father spoke up:

“ZiXuan!” Jin GuangShan turned to him angrily, glaring.

“Father.” Jin ZiXuan responded indifferently.

“Why would you help MouShi breaking ChunYu-Jun out?!”

“You might’ve forgotten father, but there were not just six heroes in the Sunshot Campaign.” He looked over at his father coldly. “Sect Leader Lan put his faith in me and gave me the task to look out for these people while they’re in Koi Tower.”

“Why would you listen to him rather than me?!” Jin GuangShan demanded.

“We’re sworn brothers.” Jin ZiXuan reminded him. Lan SiZhui shared a look with his friends; he completely forgot that after the last battle of the Sunshot Campaign, Nie MingJue, Lan XiChen and Jin ZiXuan swore brotherhood, as the three generals of the war. They did not share such a deep bond as in the future the Venerated Triad had, because Jin ZiXuan was

much younger than Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen. This was an unusual sworn brotherhood, but not less valid. “Besides,” Jin ZiXuan continued, “Jin Ling is clinging to my thigh. If I let you kill ChunYu-Jun as you planned after my wedding, he would have taken his wrath out on me. Who wants to deal with that?”

This was intended as a light-hearted joke, but the only person it seemed to amuse was Wei WuXian.

“ZiXuan!” Jin GuangShan raged. “How would you even know such thing?! This is not a matter of your stupid friendships!”

“Stupid friendships?” Jin ZiXuan frowned, turning to his father. “Am I not also associated with them all? After all, I married A-Li. Her brothers are Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian, who are also sworn brothers of Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling. Jin Ling is also connected to the Jin Sect by blood, and Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui are cousins by association. I’ve even heard that Jin Ling’s maternal older uncle and Lan SiZhui’s former adoptive father were associated with the Jiang Sect.”

“Ah, you heard that?” Wei WuXian asked, and Jin ZiXuan glared at him.

“You told me.”

“Oh.”

“A-Xian.” Sect Leader Jiang warned him softly, to let father and son talk.

“ZiXuan, perhaps I did not teach you well. Once we return, I’ll have to explain these things to you once again.” Jin GuangShan looked at his son harshly, who looked back calmly.

“I was taught well, father. However, you taught me to be secretive and keep my personal life separated from the Sect’s business. However, as the main family of the Sect, aren’t our entire life supposed to be the Sect’s business? I know your teachings, father, I just disagree with them. I didn’t have reason to say this earlier, but now I will.”

“Your insolence is no business of the cultivation world. If you have something to say, say it later.” Jin GuangShan told him dismissively.

“I’ve always been a good son to you, father, kept to myself, didn’t butt into your business. When you taught me, I listened, when you dismissed me, I went. However, in this matter, I won’t submit. Even though these people came into my life uninvited, I’ve found that their ideas are righteous. Lan JingYi, after failing to convince you to join the war effort, convinced me to join. A son must accomplish things separate from the father before he can call himself a person, not a son; because of this, during the Sunshot Campaign, Sect Leaders Lan, Nie and Jiang put their trust in me and I could accomplish this war without your support. I’ve come to trust these people with my life, so if they have something to say, I will listen to them.”

“Against your own father?!” Jin GuangShan glared. Jin ZiXuan scoffed.

“Especially against my own father, for if they are wrong, I want to be the one who proves it to them, to prove to you I am your loyal son.” Jin ZiXuan answered. Lan SiZhui didn’t know that the Young Master Jin was so talented with words, not only did he stand up for himself, he even turned it around, so his father could say nothing, just accept this.

“You still told MouShi about the prison, how is that supposed to prove your loyalty?”

“I wouldn’t have told him, if I didn’t hear proof of their claims myself. They were not safe in Koi Tower anymore, and so I gave them a chance to explain themselves properly.”

“Explain themselves properly, you broke out two criminals, why would they explain themselves?”

“Can’t you see?” Jin ZiXuan gestured around. “These people never wanted to become criminals. They wanted to protect people they cared about, as they have. Once this was done, what reason would they have to commit crimes? If they broke out, they broke out with a reason, not just to escape. They are the most wanted criminals of the cultivation world, and they’re not stupid. They have something to say, so listen to them.”

“All I’ve been trying to do had been to listen to them, in the Burial Mounds, later in Nightless City, didn’t they get enough chances?”

“New mysteries arose that are connected to old, unsolved ones, how could they not have something to say?” Jin ZiXuan shook his head.

“Indeed, Young Master Jin. And so, the question still remains.” Wei WuXian said, stepping forward, looking at Jin GuangShan with distrust. “How did Su MinShan come to know about the prison? How was he able to enter, and not only that, but to kill a person inside?”

“Wei WuXian, aren’t you also an associate of these people? How dare you question me?” Jin GuangShan glared. At this, however, Jiang FengMian also stepped forward.

“He’s speaking out of turn, but he’s not speaking without reason. If I ask the same thing, will you answer? Sect Leader Jin, as someone who knew you for a long time, I’m awaiting your explanation: How did Clan Leader Su enter and kill a person in your secret prisons? If you don’t answer, we will have no choice but to assume all you’ve been accused of today is true, and you’re the one pulling the strings.”

For a long moment, there was no answer. Then, Jin GuangShan nodded.

“Sect Leader Jiang, you’re right. It seems like my sons have betrayed me, even though I believed to have raised them better.”

“He didn’t even raise one of them.” Lan JingYi whispered. Jin Ling threw his qiankun pouch at the other. “Just saying.” Lan JingYi pouted.

“ChunYu-Jun, now you’ve successfully revealed Jin GuangYao and Su MinShan’s involvement in these events.” Clan Leader Yao said. “However, there’s still no conclusion. Why would Jin GuangYao and Su MinShan try to blacken your name with their actions? Not

the whole world is out there to get you. We might be thankful for you to reveal these events, but what was the point?"

Lan SiZhui, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi exchanged a look. They knew why they did this, to stop Jin GuangYao from archiving his plans, to save the future, to save Jin Ling's father. However, to reveal it, it would mean revealing their origins. While most people present already knew, there were several others who didn't.

"There was no point." Lan SiZhui said, turning back to the Sect and Clan Leaders. "Jin Ling stood by me when I was trying to protect my family. He broke me out of prison because he heard I was to be killed soon. We came here because at the night of the assassination attempt, we caught Su She in the act and wanted to prove to the cultivation world these people's plot. Since Young Master Jin is right, Jin Ling is a relative, this was to help Jin Ling protect his own family, by association, mine as well."

"But ChunYu-Jun, we didn't come here for this proof." A person stepped forward. He was wearing dark blue robes with white accents. Lan SiZhui didn't recognize him or the colors he wore. He was likely another Clan's Leader. "The Sect Leaders received letters stating that ChunYu-Jun and MouShi broke into the Cloud Recesses and kidnapped Hanguang-Jun, yet it's Feng CiKe here, not Hanguang-Jun. Sect Leader Lan also asked, but they reported this rumor was true from the Cloud Recesses."

At this, Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exchanged a look.

"Clan Leader Bao, my apologies." Lan XiChen said after a pause. So, this was the Bao Clan Leader. "This is my fault. It is true, we've all received these letters saying WangJi had been kidnapped. However, at the same time, I also received a message from my Sect, stating Feng CiKe was kidnapped. When we set out, it was my confusion that caused this." He said apologetically. "When I confirmed the kidnapping, I was actually referring to JingYi's kidnapping and not WangJi's."

"So, then, Hanguang-Jun is still in the Cloud Recesses, unharmed?" At this, Lan XiChen pressed his lips together, looking down.

"He is still in Cloud Recesses."

"Ah, Sect Leader Lan, I'm glad." Clan Leader Bao said. "I also have a brother, and we also grew up without a mother, so I know what it feels like to be protective."

"Thank you, Clan Leader Bao." Lan XiChen smiled at him tightly. Clan Leader Bao bowed.

"Just Bao Jin is enough, Sect Leader Lan." He said humbly, then stepped back.

"So, ChunYu-Jun, since you just wished to reveal this plot, how should we proceed?" Jin GuangShan asked. "You were in punishment still when MouShi heard about the possibilities, and he rushed to your excuse. You also didn't put up a fight but went with him. In your escape, you also harmed several of my men."

“Indeed, how should we proceed?” Jin Ling asked, glancing over at Jin GuangYao. “I refuse to go back. Lan SiZhui also refuses.”

“Aren’t you being arrogant?” Jin GuangShan scoffed. “My son just said you didn’t break out for the sake of being free.”

“Am I being arrogant, Sect Leader Jin?” Jin Ling asked back. “What plots we just uncovered, all connected to your Koi Tower, dangerous and shady, who would want to go back?”

“I believe what Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui just uncovered should be put on the scale as well.” Jiang FengMian said thoughtfully.

“I propose these prisoners to be taken to the Cloud Recesses.” Nie MingJue said unexpectedly. “It is clear they’re not safe in the Koi Tower.”

“Would they also not be safe in your Unclear Realm or in the Lotus Pier?” Jin GuangShan challenged.

“I don’t care to keep prisoners.” Nie MingJue told him with a scowl. “And I’m sure Sect Leader Jiang also have his own hands full with the recent marriage and Wei WuXian.”

“I’m in favor of this.” Jiang FengMian nodded. “Sect Leader Lan would be just. We all know even though he is his own brother, Lan WangJi was also severely punished for his crimes. There is no doubt, while still receiving the due punishment, these people would also be safe from further scheming. As for you, Sect Leader Jin, your son also committed some atrocities. I think it best if you concentrate on this issue instead, and leave the rest to us.”

There was a pause, when everyone was either looking at the criminals or Jin GuangShan, waiting for his decision. This was also an insult from the Jiang Sect Leader, but tension was already high – if he openly took offense, the Sects and possibly the bigger Clans would also turn against him.

“Alright.” Jin GuangShan agreed in the end. Lan SiZhui felt like a huge weight just fell off his sore shoulders. “Since I also have my own sons to punish, I’ll allow it.”

“Sect Leader Jin is generous.” Clan Leader Yao nodded.

“Sect Leader Jin.” Jin Ling said unexpectedly, without any distain or mocking in his voice. Jin GuangShan turned to him sharply. “Please don’t forget that one of your sons attempted to kill the other. Since Jin ZiXuan is your heir, I would carefully consider your actions towards Jin GuangYao in the future.”

“You really are so thick-faced, Jin Ling, to give me, a Sect Leader advice.” Jin GuangShan glared at him, however, Jin Ling didn’t seem to take it personally this time.

“I’m saying this not as your enemy or disciple.” Jin Ling countered. “But as someone who grew up without a father or a mother.” He paused. “Or a grandfather, for that matter.” He said pointedly. Jin GuangShan’s eyes widened, flicking over to Jin GuangYao before returning to Jin Ling’s challenging one.

There was a pause, in place of a ‘thank you’, but nobody called Jin GuangShan out on it. After all, it was still unclear whether he was the one to send Jin GuangYao and Su MinShan after Lan SiZhui’s Hudie. Trying to save face, he raised his chin then, gesturing his men.

“Take the assassin, so we can bring him back to Koi Tower and punish him.” Jin GuangShan ordered coldly. Jin soldiers rushed forward, and Lan SiZhui noted, one of them was Li XingXu. The chief of guards glared at him as he came closer to them, intent on arresting Su She.

However, before he could get there, suddenly, Su She pushed Lan JingYi away, who was also a little distracted. Su She grabbed his sword from the other and took a couple of steps back. Li XingXu also drew his sword, facing the other man.

“Lianfang-Zun!” Su She called out. “You promised that when we finally find out the method, we will go back and prosper!”

“MinShan!” Jin GuangYao cried out as well.

“Lianfang-Zun, was what they said true?! Were you really going to leave me behind and take all the credit for yourself?! You promised we would right all wrongs that came to us in the past!”

“Clan Leader Su, don’t do anything stupid!” Someone called out.

“Stupid?! That’s what I am, right?” Su She snarled. “To the great gentries, a nobody like me doesn’t even matter.” He glanced around. “But what would happen if they lost a great gentry of their own?!” He cried, then leapt up, over towards the Sects, heading straight for Jin ZiXuan!

However, before he could reach him, Jin Ling cried out. “ZiXuan!” And tossed his bow. Jin ZiXuan caught it in time, then drew without an arrow, shooting towards Su She. Lan SiZhui could only watch as a strong, golden flare of spiritual energy was released, striking Su She successfully, knocking him down – right towards the lake! Su She rolled five times, in the end falling face-first into the still water. He sputtered, pushing himself up on his hands – however, the next moment, his breath hitched and he began convulsing violently. From beneath the water, hands reached out and grabbed onto Su She’s robes, pulling him in deeper, then under water. Everyone could only watch as bubbles rippled on the surface near the middle of the lake before it stilled once again.

There was a stunned silence following this.

“Ah, was he just dragged under by those corpses?!” Clan Leader Yao asked one of his disciples, pointing at the water.

“Clan Leader, I think we should really leave this place.” His disciple told him.

“Ah, yes.” Clan Leader Yao nodded, then turned to the others. “Friends, I propose we go before more frightening things happen.”

“Right.” Nie MingJue grumbled. “You go ahead, Clan Leader Yao.”

“Thank you, thank you.” Clan Leader Yao bowed, then gathering his disciples, he quickly took off.

“We’re leaving as well.” Jin GuangShan said coldly, looking over at his sons, then at his guards, who still stood between the Sects and where Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui stood. Li XingXu looked over at Lan SiZhui, then huffed, gesturing his men and going back to their Sect. However, before the Jin could leave, Jin Ling stepped forward and called out:

“Hey! Give me back my bow!” He told Jin ZiXuan. The other raised one eyebrow, lifting the bow to see it properly. He turned it around in his hand, looking at it approvingly. It was really surprising that the tool also reacted to his spiritual energy. Lan SiZhui wondered if this was because of the blood relation between the two, although Jiang Cheng also tried it before the war, when Lan SiZhui was still imprisoned in the Burial Mounds and the Jiang and Jin Ling went to the Cloud Recesses to discuss the beginning of the war.

“Huangfeng is a fine weapon.” Jin ZiXuan said after examining the weapon, then held it out to the side, as if there would be a servant taking it. However, what happened instead was this: Lan XiChen gestured one of his disciples who rushed over to take it from him. “It’s a shame you don’t have a sword as well.” Jin ZiXuan said as the Lan disciple held onto the weapon, not bringing it back, to which Jin Ling glared at him for. However, after hearing what Jin ZiXuan said, Jin Ling turned his glare at his father.

“I have a sword.” Jin Ling scoffed, crossing his arms across his chest.

“I’ve never seen you with one.” Jin ZiXuan told him.

“I definitely have one. It’s my father’s sword.” Jin Ling said defiantly, then he looked away. “I just don’t have it on me.”

“Well, you should carry it then.” Jin ZiXuan said. “Your father would be ashamed if he knew you keep forgetting to bring it.”

“You—!” Jin Ling glared at him.

“ZiXuan.” Jin GuangShan said sternly. As Jin ZiXuan turned to him, Jin GuangShan gave him a look, then without saying goodbyes to the other Sect and Clan Leaders, turned and stormed out of the cave. The rest of the Jin Sect followed, though Jin ZiXuan remembered his manners and bowed to the others before following his father.

“Ah, Sect Leader Lan, we will also be going.” Bao Jin, the Bao Clan’s head also spoke up. “Sorry that the letter I brought was fake. I didn’t mean harm, but it seemed serious and important. Especially with that jade token, I was sure...” He trailed off, looking embarrassed. Lan XiChen smiled at him faintly.

“That’s fine, Clan Leader Bao. These things are better to take seriously.”

“Thanks ZeWu-Jun!” Bao Jin bowed to the Sect Leader, who nodded to him dismissively. Like this, Bao Jin couldn’t linger, so he, too, left. After this, the rest of the bigger Clans also left, saying their goodbyes to the remaining Sect Leaders. Jiang FengMian turned to Lan XiChen then.

“Sect Leader Lan, I owe you an apology.” He said, and Lan XiChen also turned to him, looking curious and a little confused. “If I knew this would happen while Lan SiZhui was in Koi Tower, I’d have advocated to have him sent to Cloud Recesses. Knowing this plot now...” Jiang FengMian trailed off, shaking his head in self-reprimand. However, Lan XiChen smiled at him, some tension leaving his shoulders.

“Don’t feel apologetic, Sect Leader Jiang. You wouldn’t have known.”

“It seemed like the lot of you did, though.” Jiang FengMian looked over at the three of them, then at Nie MingJue before settling back on Lan XiChen.

“As was previously stated, during the war we’ve had discussions about several of these relevant matters. I hope Sect Leader Jiang can forgive me for not disclosing these things previously.”

“Mn.” Jiang FengMian seemed to think about this, then smiled at Lan XiChen. “Naturally, I wouldn’t question Sect Leader Lan. The discussion just now revealed there were several things I had no idea was going on, while I was busy with my own problems. I will try to pay more attention in the future.”

“Let us hope there won’t be any more matters to pay attention to in the future.” Lan XiChen answered. Jiang FengMian nodded.

Seeing the discussion coming to an end, Wei WuXian also stepped forward, grinning at Lan XiChen. “ZeWu-Jun,” he greeted with a polite bow, “thank you for your contribution today.”

“My contribution?” Lan XiChen asked, confused.

“Mn.” Wei WuXian nodded, then as if a second thought, turned to Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling. “And you guys, it’s really good to see you.”

“Why are you here? Don’t you have punishment? People would think after you’ve been let out to attend the wedding, they locked you back up again.”

“So rude!” Wei WuXian complained.

“A-Xian, that’s enough. You’ve said your greetings, it’s time to go. There are still matters to settle around Lotus Pier. Ah, Sect Leader Lan, please await my letter regarding the thing we discussed not long ago.”

“Of course.” Lan XiChen nodded. With this, they bowed to each other, then Jiang FengMian also left.

“Ah, you guys!” Wei WuXian called back before they completely disappeared in the tunnel. “We’ll talk soon, alright?”



“Mn.” Lan SiZhui answered. Nie MingJue waited until he was far away before turning to Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui. He addressed Jin Ling.

“It seems MouShi really doesn’t worry about useless things then.” He said. Jin Ling snorted humorlessly.

“I really don’t.”

“Good thing this plot with Jin GuangYao and Su She was revealed. Too bad the other couldn’t be brought to justice.” He looked over at the lake with a frown.

“It is indeed.” Lan XiChen said with a sigh. Nie MingJue turned to him then.

“XiChen. Will you proceed with the plan then?” He asked cryptically. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look. What plan now?

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded. He glanced over at the three of them. “Now that these disciples will be back in the Cloud Recesses, we can work on this problem.”

“That’s good.” Nie MingJue nodded. “They should be where they belong.”

“Where we belong?” Jin Ling scoffed. “I’m not even—”

“Oh!” Lan JingYi cut him off with an exclamation. Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui looked over at him. He wasn’t looking at them though, but at Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue, who were watching them as well.

“What?” Jin Ling asked with a frown, and Lan JingYi turned to him, eyes wide.

“Jin Ling. We’re going back where we belong.” He said, excitedly and pointedly. “To where we come from.” At this, Jin Ling’s eyes widened. Lan SiZhui still didn’t understand. Seeing his expression, Lan JingYi made a face as if to emphasize what he just said. Then, Lan SiZhui understood. Where they came from! The future!

“We’re—” He began, but cut himself off, conscious of the disciples backing Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue.

“Yes.” Lan JingYi said, grinning.

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui breathed. Before he could really begin to think about the implications, Nie MingJue addressed them.

“The three of you. Even though we had our differences in the past, you’re not bad people.” He said awkwardly.

“It was good to get to know you, Sect Leader Nie.” Lan JingYi told him. “So much better than your brother…” He grumbled under his breath.

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui reprimanded him lightly, but Lan JingYi just shrugged at this.

“Mn.” Nie MingJue frowned at them. “Then, goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Sect Leader Nie.” The two Lan and Jin Ling bowed to him. Nie MingJue acknowledged this with an inclination of his head.

“I’ll have a word.” Lan XiChen said. “Please, supervise until I return.” He told his disciples, who bowed and hurried over, surrounding Lan SiZhui and his friends. Nie MingJue took a torch from one of his disciples and sent them forward before him and Lan XiChen also entered the tunnel leading outside, though at a much slower pace, their murmuring voices just barely audible.

“What are they talking about you think?” Lan JingYi asked. Lan SiZhui, now that they needn’t to pay attention, sat on the ground to relieve his sore back a little. If Lan JingYi and Jin Ling found this strange, they didn’t show. Jin Ling frowned after the Sect Leaders and answered Lan JingYi.

“Sect business, how am I supposed to know? Why do you want to know?”

“I was just wondering, stop bullying me.”

“I’m not even bullying you, what are you talking about? You’re so annoying.”

“See? You’re shamelessly bullying me. What did I do to deserve it? I was kidnapped by Su MinShan. Again. You should be nicer.”

“How did he kidnap you in the first place? How careless are you?”

“He caught me by surprise, even knocked me out!”

“So pathetic.”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t forget who you’re talking to. We will go home, what will people say when they hear you speak to me like that? You’ll definitely meet your end by a Jin disciple’s sword.”

“As if anyone likes you enough to kill me for any offense.”

“They don’t need to like me to protect their Leader.”

“Who are you the Leader of? Angry weasels?”

“Fuck you!”

“See, now you’re doing it. What will people say, their Leader has such a dirty mouth! Young Mistress, it’s really unbecoming.”

“You—!”

Lan SiZhui's attention wandered, and he looked over at the lake, feeling bad about how Su She met his end. He wondered if the lake could be cleansed and this cave cured of the lingering resentful energy. He also wondered...

"What will happen to the Su Clan now?" He asked nobody in particular. Surprisingly, not one of his friends, who just stopped arguing when they heard his question, but one of the disciples surrounding them spoke up.

"They are the Lan Sect's familial disciples. Su MinShan wanted to part ways, but now we needn't to." He said.

"Who will lead them though?" Lan JingYi frowned. "Even when they haven't parted yet, the head of the Su family was the Su Clan's Leader as well. I'm not aware Su MuShi or Su MinShan had a child."

"The main Sect Leader decides." Jin Ling said. "If Lan XiChen wants to get rid of the Clan, he will just send away the disciples who don't belong to him and take back those who do. If he leaves the Clan, it's usual for these kinds of situations for a Clan elder and his family to take over."

"Who would that be in this situation?" Lan JingYi furrowed his brows, looking over at the disciple who answered Lan SiZhui in the first place. He shrugged.

"I'm not familiar with the Su Clan."

"I hope it's not Su SiShui." Lan JingYi grumbled. At Lan SiZhui's questioning look, he said: "He is so smelly! SiZhui, remember when I accidentally fell into that grave? That corpse smelled better than him!"

"Even after you threw up onto it?" Lan SiZhui asked and Lan JingYi nodded enthusiastically. Lan SiZhui made a face.

"Corpses aren't even that bad." Jin Ling inserted. Lan JingYi turned to him with wide eyes.

"It was a water corpse fished out of the water two days before. Someone pulled him out and began to dig a grave, but it was summer and it was too hot so they never finished shoveling."

"Ew. Why are you telling me stories like this?!" Jin Ling made a disgusted face. Lan JingYi looked at him pointedly.

"Exactly. And the worse part is, he loves to go up next to you and fix your posture! He has this cane, he carries it everywhere, but he never had to use it, because everyone immediately fixes themselves as soon as they see... smell him coming." Lan JingYi shuddered with a sour face.

"Brother Lan, even if he becomes Clan Leader, I don't think you have to worry." The Lan disciple next to them said, though he was clearly trying very hard to contain his laughter.

"Easy for you to say!" Lan JingYi complained. "I will—My younger—ah, my brother will have to grow up with him." Lan JingYi said, looking devastated.

“WangYu.” Lan XiChen called as he re-entered the cave. At his voice, the lot of them turned to him, Lan SiZhui standing. The disciple who had been talking to them also turned to Lan XiChen and bowed.

“ZeWu-Jun.”

“Lan WangYu, you’ve also been in the party WangJi took here anno, right?”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan WangYu answered. “Although, this is strange.” He said, looking at the water. “When we left, we performed *Cleansing* as per Second Young Master Lan’s orders. At the time, we believed the resentful energy had been cleared up.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen hummed thoughtfully. “You still left the bodies in the water, right?”

“Right, Sect Leader.” Lan WangYu nodded. “We didn’t want to act carelessly. However, we returned to Moling and notified Clan Leader Su about it. He told us he would take care of it. I guess he didn’t want to risk touching the water either, since he left the bodies here as well.”

“Alright. After we take these disciples back to Cloud Recesses, please return with a group. Perform *Cleansing*, suppress and eliminate if necessary. Don’t let the dead unrest.”

“Yes, Sect Leader. Ah, I should take A-Sang as well. Last time, he didn’t pay attention. The fog was so thick, even though he was only two steps behind, because he took the wrong turn, he got lost for two days before finding his way out and into Moling. He scared us so much, we spent hours searching for him, I even walked into a tree and broke my nose because of it.”

Lan XiChen repressed a smile at that. “Then make sure you bring JiSang as well. This time, don’t break your nose.”

“Yes, Sect Leader.” Lan WangYu grinned. Lan XiChen nodded to him, then turned to the others.

“Let us go back to Moling first. We will spend the night.” He said. The disciples agreed, bowing. Lan XiChen led them outside, heading back towards Moling. By this time, it was broad daylight. Even though the woods didn’t let a lot of light onto their level, it was significantly lighter than when Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling came in. The Lan went through and arrived to Moling without any issues. As they arrived to the Su Clan’s residence, people were already awake, running around, busy. It was indeed midday by then. One of the disciples stopped for them and bowed.

“Sect Leader Lan, welcome. Sorry for the ruckus. Uh, Clan Leader Su is not here currently, even though he was reported to have come back from an errand last night.”

“It’s no problem.” Lan XiChen said with a sigh. “Please, notify your elders that the Lan Sect has arrived and I wish to speak with them now.”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun. Uh, will you be staying here as well?”

“Yes.” Lan XiChen said. “We will spend the night. Please, prepare some rooms for these disciples.”

“Alright.” The disciple nodded, distractedly looking around. Catching sight of something, he called over: “A-Jun! Come, quick! The Lan Sect Leader and his disciples are staying here.”

“Is this related to the major Sects coming through here last night?” The other disciple said, then seeing Lan XiChen, quickly bowed and apologized for being nosy. Lan XiChen sighed, patient, but surely eager to begin the meeting with the elders. “Ah, Sect Leader, I’ll prepare you rooms now!” He said and hurried off.

“Sect Leader, I’ll go notify the elders now.” The other disciple said and also hurried off. Once their rooms were done, they were placed in them and Lan XiChen left to speak to the elders.

## Empathy I.

Lan XiChen spent the rest of the day and the following morning in discussion with the Su Clan's elders. While the Lan disciples waited for the elders and Lan XiChen to break and get going, they took their breakfast – because of this, since there was not enough room in the Clan's dining hall, the Lan disciples ended up taking their food outside their rooms on improvised round tables, enjoying the morning cool and the food.

As they were waiting, Jin Ling also woke up and joined them. However, as he was walking towards his friends to join them for breakfast, suddenly, he stopped and looked down. Looking over to see what the commotion was about, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi saw a small child sitting in the dirt by Jin Ling's legs, a peculiar expression on his little face as he didn't understand why he fell down.

"A-Cheng!" A woman called out, and soon, a disciple in Su Clan clothing came running up to the child and Jin Ling, leaning down to pick him up. "Ah, A-Cheng, you're so fast already, you're surely going to cause your poor mother qi deviation before you turn two." She cooed to the child now in her hands, affectionately playing with his hands.

"Watch where he's going." Jin Ling told her with a scoff. "How old is he anyways, is he even allowed outside?"

"Hey!" Lan JingYi jumped up unexpectedly, running over. At this, Lan SiZhui also got up and went over, hoping his friends wouldn't cause a scene this early in the morning. "Stop bullying a young mother, are you stupid?!" Lan JingYi glared at Jin Ling, who looked back at him surprised. Lan SiZhui was also surprised – Lan JingYi had always found joy in needling Jin Ling about his manners, but this ferocity was unusual.

Before anyone could answer, a familiar figure also showed up.

When Lan WangJi and Lan SiZhui returned from the indoctrination to take back the Cloud Recesses, Su MuShi gave them three dozen disciples to help out. These people were then divided into groups with different tasks – Lan SiZhui was in the group that went through the back mountains and would attack the Wen from the back, while Lan WangJi attacked from towards the gates. In Lan SiZhui's group was a disciple he heard of but never met before: Lan ChenGuang, Lan JingYi's father. They worked well together to free the imprisoned Lan disciples. Since then, Lan SiZhui haven't met him, but he was already familiar with the other and so immediately recognized him.

As he neared, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi bowed to him. Lan ChenGuang returned it with a smile.

"Brother Lan, it is good to see you again. I've heard there was a ruckus in the mountains earlier, and Clan Leader Su threatened people's lives – I hope you are all uninjured and can forgive the Su Clan for this offense."

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded without any hard feelings. “Young Master Lan, these are my friends, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi.” At this, Lan JingYi made a noise and then unexpectedly turned around! Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exchanged a confused look. “Ah, JingYi...” Lan SiZhui began to console his friend, however, the next moment, the female disciple let out a loud laugh. Everyone looked at her as she seemed to enjoy Lan JingYi’s embarrassment.

“Oh, forgive me.” She said, inclining her head but not bowing, mindful of the toddler in her arms. “We remember this Young Master very well!” She laughed. Lan ChenGuang huffed amused, and shook his head, turning to Lan SiZhui.

“Brother, forgive me for not introducing my wife, Su ZhuoXuan. And this little one is our A-Cheng.” He said, then glanced at Lan JingYi’s back. “The truth is, a few years ago, this Lan disciple came to Moling with some guards, who said he claimed that we were his parents. However, while it is a coincidence that my son and this disciple has the same names, I would know if I had a grown up son!”

“Ah, Young Master, would you like to meet the person whose identity you stole?” Su ZhuoXuan asked from Lan JingYi’s back, still laughing at him. “Ah, A-Cheng, you’re only turning two, but you’re already so famous, people want to steal your name and say your accomplishments are theirs!” She cooed to the toddler, who didn’t seem to understand anything from this.

“It was a misunderstanding!” Lan JingYi turned back, his eyes wide. “I already explained, why are you still bullying me about this?” He pouted. At this, even Jin Ling snorted, amused.

“Don’t you deserve it?” He asked.

“You—!” Lan JingYi glared at the other, however, before they could start arguing, Lan ChenGuang cleared his throat pointedly. Surprisingly, at this, Lan JingYi immediately stopped arguing.

“A-Xuan, we should get going.” Lan ChenGuang said, and Su ZhuoXuan nodded with a smile. They said their goodbyes and began walking away. However, then Jin Ling looked over at Lan JingYi and made a pointed face at him.

“What?” Lan JingYi asked, confused.

“Go.” Jin Ling hissed lowly, gesturing with his head at the little family.

“Huh?” Lan JingYi still didn’t understand. At this, Jin Ling huffed and called out:

“Hey, wait!” To this, the little family turned back. Jin Ling raised his eyebrows at Lan JingYi, who looked back at him confused. In the end, Jin Ling rolled his eyes and turned to the Lan disciples, who had been watching this scene the whole time, acting like they were not at all. “Hey, we’re broke, give us some money for good fortune.” Jin Ling told them.

At this, there was hesitation, then one of the disciples, Lan WangYu stood and reached into his sleeve, pulling out his money pouch, handing over a gold. Jin Ling took Lan JingYi’s hand, put the gold into it, closed his fist around it then pushed him towards the couple.

Lan JingYi looked back at Lan SiZhui with a frightened expression, so he nodded encouragingly. Lan JingYi then took a deep breath and went over.

“Ah, it’s not proper, but please, accept this lucky money from me. Ah, well, from Lan WangYu. Through me.” Lan JingYi said awkwardly, holding out the money and bowing. Lan ChenGuang looked over at Jin Ling with a questioning look, but he didn’t react. In the end, he smiled at Lan JingYi and nodded to his wife, who took the money with a silent laughter on her face.

“Lan JingYi, I thought only children get lucky money.” She said with a grin.

“Oh, no, it’s for... Ah, well...” Lan JingYi stuttered, then huffed, calming down and glaring at the woman. “You can’t help but tease me, right? What will your child learn from you?”

“Sorry, Young Master.” She grinned. “If my child learns how to handle bullies because of me, I don’t mind him learning.” At this, Jin Ling huffed and rolled his eyes. Lan JingYi pursed his lips.

“I don’t remember you being so mean...” He muttered under his breath.

“JingYi.” Lan SiZhui called over before he could offend the others. “You gave them the money, let them go on their way.”

“Ah, right.” Lan JingYi said. “Sorry for holding you up.”

“It’s no issue. Thank you for the money, Lan WangYu, Lan JingYi.” Lan ChenGuang said. They bowed to each other again, then the little family turned and walked off. Coincidentally, they ran into Lan XiChen who was just returning. Since they were farther, they couldn’t hear what they were saying, but they seemed to greet each other, exchange a few words, then say their goodbyes. As Lan XiChen approached, the other disciples stood as well and bowed to him.

“Lan ChenGuang seemed to be impressed by my young disciples.” He said once the greetings were over. “Is there something I should know about?” He asked not unkindly.

“Not at all.” Jin Ling answered in their stead. “Can we go now?”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen nodded after a moment of pause.



The journey didn’t take long, seeing that the Lan Sect’s home was also close to the Su Clan’s home. Walking up the stairs was straining and Lan SiZhui was thankful that Lan JingYi had no problem asking for breaks between going up, because Lan SiZhui definitely needed them, as he imagined Lan JingYi also did.

He wanted to ask his friend about his injuries, but also suspected this would lead to him also asking about Lan SiZhui’s and he was still uncomfortable sharing the extent of his punishment with anyone. This wasn’t necessarily about his pride, but he knew how worried his friends would be if they knew and he detested them fussing over him. He knew they



meant well, but it was a little like when his leg was broken and Wei WuXian wanted to help him. It was just too much.

As they neared the gates, Lan SiZhui got more and more nervous. He didn't know what to think about returning. On the one hand he was longing for home, for the feeling he got in the Cloud Recesses, that quiet reassurance and positive energy, peace he grew up in. On the other hand, he was afraid. He was now not returning home, for he left the Sect long ago, and this was like intruding on a place that once belonged to him but not anymore. It was uncomfortable and scary.

The guards at the gates didn't fret at all and didn't even blink at the sight of Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui. As they ascended the stairs towards the walls, Lan SiZhui could hardly look up from the pavement in front of his feet. In Moling, he got new clothes, nondescript robes that didn't belong to neither the Lan Sect, nor the Su Clan. They were simply light blue robes without any embroidery. This, along with his missing forehead ribbon, made Lan SiZhui feel like he didn't belong here at all.

He thought, perhaps, like this, he also understood Wei WuXian's reluctance to return to the Lotus Pier. It felt too strange, to be at home and not belong. He got homesick in his own home, this was a strange feeling.

"Are you okay?" Lan JingYi asked quietly next to him. Looking up, Lan SiZhui smiled at him and nodded, though there must've been some telling signs on his face, because Lan JingYi didn't look reassured at all. "It's going to be fine."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui hummed.

Once they were inside the gates, footsteps approached. Two disciples came to greet the Sect Leader and his entourage.

"Sect Leader Lan." Two disciples bowed deeply. "You've returned. The elders wish to speak with you."

"Right." Lan XiChen sighed softly. "Please, let them know I will be there right away. First, I need to take care of an urgent matter."

"Sect Leader, the elders said to remind you you've been away for a month." One of the disciples said, still in a bow.

"As I'm aware." Lan XiChen said softly. "Please, let them know what I've said. If they have anything else to say about it, they can wait until I arrive." The two senior disciples hesitated, exchanged a look, then bowed again and hurried off. Lan XiChen sighed again and turned to his other disciples. "You're dismissed." He told them. "Lan WangYu, please do as we've discussed. Don't take unnecessary risks, but this issue needs to be dealt with."

"Yes, ZeWu-Jun." These disciples bowed as well then majority of them left, only two staying by their sides. Lan SiZhui suspected they were there as guards.

“Come on.” Lan XiChen said, turning and heading towards the Hanshi. Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look, but followed him regardless. They were let inside, then Lan XiChen instructed the two guards to stay outside. He came inside as well, applying a silencing talisman right away.

They sat and Lan XiChen offered them water this time instead of tea. After they all drank some, Lan XiChen turned to them, looking serious and a bit grim as well.

“I’ve talked to the Su elders. They’re in discussion regarding the future of the Clan, but they seem to be in favor of remaining a familial Clan under an elder’s supervision.” He said, though this felt like a small talk to have before he actually addressed what he wanted. Indeed, a few moments later, he asked: “Jin Ling, SiZhui, were you the ones who sent that letter with the Bao Clan to Lanling?”

“Yes.” Jin Ling said without a care, sitting with his back straight, his face betraying none of his emotions.

“Ah, wait, you guys, what letter?” Lan JingYi frowned. “I don’t know anything. How come you’re here at all? Aren’t you supposed to be in Lanling? Did they mention something about you two breaking out of Koi Tower?”

“It’s not that dramatic.” Jin Ling waved his hand dismissively.

“And what assassination attempt were you talking about? And why does SiZhui look like this?!” Lan JingYi continued to ask questions, despite not receiving an answer yet to his previous ones. “I don’t know anything! I’ve been secluded for the past three months and haven’t heard a word from any of you!” Here, he pointedly looked at Lan XiChen.

“Right.” Jin Ling said. “I’ll tell you the happenings later. What I want to know now is this; just what plans was Nie MingJue talking about just now?” He asked Lan XiChen as well. “What are you plotting behind our backs, regarding the future?!”

At this, Lan XiChen sighed softly. He then took a moment to think, and turned to Lan JingYi. “The truth is, JingYi, me not talking to you was deliberate. On the one hand, I felt bad about what went down in Nightless City. It was my goal to get all three of you to come with us to the Cloud Recesses, but in the end, I was unable to convince Jin GuangShan, even with MingJue’s help.” He pressed his lips together, looking down. Lan SiZhui thought back, then remembered the talisman the two Sect Leaders burned at the end of the conference...

*“Talking without Words?” He wondered aloud, and at this, Lan XiChen looked up, seemingly surprised, then smiled small, nodding.*

“Indeed. Before we went to the conference, I thought of this plan and shared with MingJue, hoping that him backing me up would have more weight than if only I spoke up, seeing two of my disciples were also caught up in the plot, they would think I’m being partial towards you. But if MingJue was on my side, who would say my request was born from affection? He also agreed to this plan and helped me, even used *Talking without Words* charm to speak to each other during the conference, would anything go astray. It proved to be useful when it came time to destroy the Stygian Tiger Amulet, but unfortunately only then.”

“Let us hear this plan already then.” Jin Ling crossed his arms over his chest.

“I thought... I thought that since you all escaped with the Wen, it was only the matter of time before you were found and you fought the Sects again. You would be significantly at a disadvantage, so you’d definitely lose – hopefully only in battle and not lose your lives as well. Since this was the case, it was obvious that the Sects and Clans would demand you to be punished for your crimes. However...” Lan XiChen hesitated, then sighed. “However, knowing how your people suffered in your own timeline as well, SiZhui, could anyone really say you were in the wrong? People kill for lesser offenses, and while I don’t agree, nor condone the act of taking revenge, I cannot deny it from someone who has his own experiences and morals either. This was your decision to make, and since you’re not in the Lan Sect anymore, I have no right to judge you for it now.” He paused, then continued before Jin Ling would demand him to.

“Besides this, there is also the issue of your younger selves. While it might not be a problem for SiZhui, for his younger self is with his family, and Jin Ling would unlikely go back to the Jin Sect after all this, therefore hardly meeting himself, Lan JingYi has strong ties to the Sect. The cultivation world doesn’t forget easily. It would be extremely suspicious to have children with the same names and faces as your own run around while you’re also here. We just met Lan ChenGuang and his family, so you know what I mean.

“Because of these reasons, I figured it would be much easier to just send you back where you came from, and not have you present for any of these things. If the Sects would’ve allowed, I’d have taken you back to the Cloud Recesses, like now, convinced the elders about a light punishment, then have you work out a method to send you back. After all, if you’ve miraculously disappeared one day, nobody would be able to demand compensation, nor blame me for hiding you away and refuse their demands.”

“So, this was your plan.” Jin Ling said with a light frown, looking down at the table between them. Lan XiChen nodded. “But we already received punishment. Why send us back now? Why can’t we just stay here?” At Lan XiChen’s curious glance, he shrugged. “It’s not that I like it here so much better, but also, wouldn’t it be hard to explain this whole thing without people thinking we’re time travelers? After all, people already know our faces and reputation. As you said, our younger selves are going to grow up here. Who’s to say somebody doesn’t figure out we were time travelers? The cultivation world doesn’t forget easily, as you said.”

“That’s true.” Lan JingYi agreed. “If they figure it out, wouldn’t we be in bigger trouble? Besides, now that they know us, now that Jin Ling got to know and befriended his father, who’s to say Jin ZiXuan is going to name his child Jin Ling? I’ve also met my parents; are they also going to name their child Lan JingYi, now that they know a random Lan disciple is also using this name?”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen hummed thoughtfully.

“But...” Jin Ling frowned deeper, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “Didn’t you say, if my parents don’t have the child, I would cease to exist? If they have a child, but it’s not me, how am I... me?” At this, Lan SiZhui could say nothing.

“I guess we didn’t think we would stay for so long and have such an impact on this world, Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi said. “Don’t blame SiZhui. He just said what seemed logical at the time. When we came to the past, this was very much a possibility. However, as you proceeded to befriend your father, even before that, as I was sent to Moling, the past already changed with these people learning our names and faces. Our actions must’ve had a big impact on the future, but even just by your appearance we’ve changed the way things would go.”

“I don’t understand.” Jin Ling said. “If we don’t exist in the past as our younger selves, how can we be... here, alive? Existing? Without a past?” He looked over the three of them, but nobody had an answer for him. “Do we even have a future to go back to?” He asked last.

“We have to have come from somewhere.” Lan JingYi said.

“We did.” Jin Ling told him.

“Well, I mean... ah, you know what I mean. This isn’t our past, therefore we shouldn’t even exist. But we do exist, which means somehow we do exist... Somewhere? Somewhen?” He made a pained expression. “How can such a simple thing as time be so complicated?”

At this, Jin Ling snorted, but said nothing. However, Lan XiChen spoke up.

“Maybe... Well, you’re thinking that as you change the past, the future also changes, therefore you also change.”

“Isn’t that what’s logical?” Jin Ling asked. Lan XiChen made an indecisive gesture.

“As JingYi says, you have to come from somewhere. Somewhen. I think what he means is what I’m thinking as well. You have lived a life with a past. Then you came back and changed the past, but this didn’t affect you, since you weren’t in the future anymore to experience these changes.”

“So, what? Our future doesn’t even exist anymore, so since we made changes here, we don’t exist in this future either?” Jin Ling asked back. Lan JingYi made a helpless motion when Jin Ling looked over.

“Maybe.” Lan XiChen said. “Don’t forget that none of us know anything for certain. It very well could be that by some magic, Lan ChenGuang and Su ZhuoXuan ended up naming their child Lan JingYi. It is possible that by some magic, Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi name their child Jin Ling.”

“So, maybe we exist, maybe we don’t, maybe we have a future we’re missing from, maybe we don’t.” Jin Ling summarized. “Can this conversation be even more annoying and confusing?”

“Start listing your uncles, surely, then we will all hold our heads and groan.” Lan JingYi teased from the side. Jin Ling didn’t get mad at this, but snorted with humor.

“Onto the topic at hand, regarding the time travel, it is up to you now, how you want to proceed. You can stay here, in this world. Or you can go back and try your luck in the

future.” They were all quiet for a long time, then when neither of them answered, Lan XiChen sighed. “Alright. I’ll give you some time to decide. However... Know that the elders will most likely not stand for having SiZhui in the Cloud Recesses for long. I’ll have to convince them to not punish him as it is. I’m afraid it will be hard to do more than that. Knowing that, you do have to decide before this happens. The *Collection of Time* is one of our founding documents; while it is not read often nor well-known, some people would definitely notice if it went missing – the best would be if it didn’t come to it, and SiZhui could study it while he’s in the Cloud Recesses.”

“Why does he need to be the one to study it?” Jin Ling asked with a confused expression. “Is there nobody else who would be able to figure out the counter spell? Surely, you yourself are an expert musician and also know a lot about this.”

“While that’s true, and I have, in fact, been studying the book, I haven’t found anything that would be able to help. And my duties also pull me away from this matter. If the answer is in a different document, appropriate research is required, and I’m afraid I do not have the means to do so. Another reason is that there are not many people who have such an intimate knowledge of the Qin language. It is a rare skill – even more rare if one knows the old Qin language as well as the modern version of it. For example, my brother is one of those who are experts in the modern Qin language, but when I asked him how well he understood the old version of it, he revealed while he found similarities with Qin language, it was quite different.” Seeing Jin Ling’s confused frown, he smiled softly. “Imagine the difference between seal script and modern writing. One might be an expert in modern writing, while they struggle to understand seal script. SiZhui can easily read seal script, and is an expert in modern writing as well.”

“That’s actually true.” Lan JingYi said. “It used to annoy me, but not anymore.” He smiled at Lan SiZhui playfully.

“Grandmaster always said I had a talent for languages, that’s why he taught me musical cultivation personally.” Lan SiZhui said.

“I thought Han—I thought your adoptive father taught you how to play.” Jin Ling frowned at him. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“Him as well, and my adoptive uncle as well. They were all responsible for teaching me how to play the qin and how to use musical cultivation.” He paused, then looked over at Lan XiChen. “Thank you ZeWu-Jun, for the opportunity. I know it must be hard to deny the elders and get them to cooperate, so we appreciate your effort. We will make our decisions soon. Until then however...” He glanced over at his friends a bit shyly. “What will happen to us now?”

Lan XiChen paused at this, then sighed.

“JingYi would have to go back to his punishment. However, as for yourself and Jin Ling, I’m not sure. My original plan was to bring you here before you received any punishment then negotiate with the elders until you found the solution to go home. Like this, however, with you already having received punishment, you’re guests here. Jin Ling definitely is, at least. As for SiZhui... if he were from our time and we knew the identity of those you consider

family, we would probably consult them about this. Since this is quite a different case, I'll have to talk to the elders about this. If they don't consider you part of the Lan Sect anymore, not even as a resigned disciple as they have been looking at your situation until now, then you're just a guest, an unwelcome one at that. Although you would be my guest, and in this case, they could hardly oppose me. If they do consider you in any way part of the Sect, they will advocate to have you punished according to your crimes."

"He has already been punished though." Jin Ling scoffed. "Why would they rule out even more punishment?"

At this, Lan XiChen sighed again. "SiZhui was punished by the Jin Sect, and for the crimes he committed against them."

"SiZhui didn't even damage a Lan disciple." Jin Ling said.

"Well..." Lan JingYi drawled, then looking over at Lan SiZhui, appeared sheepish. "Sorry."

"It's fine. I lost control, I know this." Lan SiZhui said quietly.

"Some disciples got caught up in the fight. It's not nearly as bad as the aftermath of the Bloodbath was." Lan JingYi placated him.

"Well, of course." Jin Ling told him with a frown. "The YiLing Patriarch injured and even killed thousands in the Bloodbath, hence the name; SiZhui killed and injured mere hundreds. It's not like that's so terrible." He said sarcastically, and Lan JingYi glared at him angrily. However, before they could really start bickering, Lan XiChen spoke up.

"For the injuries caused to those present back then, and also the lives lost, as well as breaking the rules SiZhui swore to uphold, he would be punished, was he a Lan disciple still, regardless of the Jin Sect's punishment. That would be taken into consideration, but surely, the elders would be able to come up with a solution."

"So, it's only up to the elders to decide whether SiZhui is still associated with the Sect? He cannot have a say and you cannot have a say?" Jin Ling asked with a frown. Lan XiChen actually shrugged!

"What do elders even do in a Sect?" Lan JingYi asked next to him with a frown. "I've always assumed they were like, advisors, but you guys always talk about them like you're fighting for authority or whatever."

"Right." Jin Ling rolled his eyes. "You call yourself Lan XiChen's confidant and you don't even know?"

"Just explain." Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. "To those unfortunate who didn't grow up learning how to govern an entire Sect."

At this, Jin Ling snorted. However, it wasn't him who answered, but Lan XiChen.

"The elders are indeed advisors. They're also teachers and authoritative figures. They are spiritual leaders. Elders are chosen by other elders – it doesn't necessarily need to be an old

person, for I am also an elder, even though I'm only past twenty. Jin Ling is also an elder."

"Are you teasing me?" Lan JingYi looked at him with an expression of a tired little brother, who has been bullied by his elder brother for hours now. Lan XiChen smiled at him amused.

"Not at all. Every Sect Leader becomes an elder the moment they take over the responsibility to lead the Sect."

"It's true. Do you remember what I told you about how Lan XiChen was too young to take over the Sect, and so he didn't?" Jin Ling asked and Lan JingYi nodded.

"It is important for the Sect Leader to have at least some experience in life, if not in leadership, in order to be considered mature enough to lead the Sect. Elders are supposed to be experts and without any life experience, how could anyone call themselves experts? Imagine a board of elders who has the knowledge of a country divided between them, having to deal with a child who only thinks of candy all the time and doesn't understand the responsibility of leading a Sect."

"Young Mistress, all I can imagine now is how you must bully your own elders to do your bidding. Hey, can the elders kill a Sect Leader, just because he's annoying?"

"You—!" Jin Ling glared at him.

"Actually, that's considered coup." Lan XiChen said, his face betraying his amusement. "Would that happen, the other Sects would step in and kill those responsible, either electing a new Sect Leader or disperse the Sect entirely."

"Ah, that's no good then." Lan JingYi sighed. Jin Ling rolled his eyes, crossing his arms across his chest.

"My elders wouldn't do that anyways. They're scared shitless."

"Huh?" Lan JingYi looked over, surprised.

"Well, after my uncle's evil plots were revealed, they know they were also guilty in enabling him, or at least not seeing this the whole time. I've been looking into removing some of them and replacing them with some I could trust. Ah, Koi Tower is a mess and until I understand all that's going on, I'm not going to just replace them just now, I'll first learn what I need."

"Is this such an important position to be this afraid from being replaced?" Lan JingYi asked, confused. Jin Ling snorted.

"Not at all. However, they're not afraid of that at all. They're afraid that I'm going to find out things about them that would prompt a more fierce step than simply sending them to retirement early and have them killed or tortured instead."

"It's the Koi Tower we're talking about." Lan JingYi shrugged. "Just have them all hanged; after all, all of them probably have done shady things."

“Thank you for the expert advice from someone who doesn’t even know what an elder does.” Jin Ling leveled him with a look, to which Lan JingYi turned defensive.

“Well, now I know! Er... Almost know. Would know if you didn’t butt in.”

“You butted in.” Jin Ling told him with a glare. “Don’t pass responsibility, it’s against the rules.”

“Oh, hey, SiZhui, do you hear this? Jin Ling actually pays attention sometimes.”

“I had to copy the rules hundreds of times! Of course I know!”

“Do you, really?” Lan JingYi grinned evilly. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“This section of *Righteousness*, titled ‘Responsibility’ was added after the GusuLan guest lectures.” He told Jin Ling, whose eyes widened. “Currently, there are only three thousand, one hundred and sixty-one rules on the Wall of Discipline, four entire sections less than in our time.”

“There are actually three thousand, one hundred and seventy-five currently.” Lan XiChen corrected. “The elders have been debating some rules for a while now and finally had them added to the rules. This new section is to be called Morality.”

“Ah! Morality is actually one of my favorites.” Lan JingYi said.

“Heavens, they have favorites.” Jin Ling looked at them as if he was looking at particularly pitiful creatures that he was horrified of at the same time. Lan JingYi made a face at him, however, before they could stray too far into play, Lan XiChen led the topic back to what they initially discussed.

“Anyhow, as I was saying, Sect Leaders automatically become elders. Otherwise, elders are, as previously stated, chosen by other elders. If there aren’t any, this is the Sect or Clan Leader’s job to choose. Elder could be anyone whose expertise is considered of the highest level. Although, this is not typical to such big Sects as ours anymore, but mostly to those bigger Clans and smaller Sects, who cannot afford to teach elders as we have. The major Sects’ elders are considered to be an expert in several subjects.

“There are some elders who prefer to be recognized by one expertise, like elder Liu, who is talented in numbers and therefore, if the Sect Leader or elders have questions about finances, they’ll most likely turn to him. However, elder Liu is also an expert in agriculture, so if the subject is that, his word will not be disregarded.

“The elders are responsible for a number of things. One of their main responsibilities is the curriculum; choosing and pacing the subjects disciplines learn; anything that is taught in the Sect is studied, then approved by the elders. Another one is upholding the discipline in the Sect. As I said, they are in charge of approving of the rules. Another one is to understand the political landscape and plan the Sect’s actions accordingly. Then also the daily things like finances and such, the elders also overlook that, although that is not their main responsibility and they work closely with those disciples whose responsibility it is.



“As for how the relationship between the elders and the Sect Leader works, it is not as straightforward as you’d imagine. A Sect Leader is a single person, and a single person can hardly always make the right decisions. The Sect elders are our advisors, teachers and if necessary, they can also overrule a Sect Leader if the majority of them think it is needed. Unlike what JingYi suggested, murder is not amongst those methods. They are consultants, not generals.

“All elders are equal to each other, except the Sect Leader. While the Sect Leader answers the elders, his choices are his to be made, whether the elders approve or not – however, it is better to keep the elders happy. Those whose elders are at odds with them, find themselves in an uncomfortable situation. The elders shoulder more than half the responsibility that would otherwise be the Sect Leader’s duty. If their Sect Leader trusts them, they could easily run the Sect without the Sect Leader needing to lift a finger; however, a Sect Leader is a position for a reason. While the Sect Leader needs the elders to keep him in line, the elders also need an authority figure to keep them in line. This is a precarious balance one must always maintain with their elders.”

“I was taught this way: the elders are above reproach from everyone except the Sect Leader and the Sect Leader is also above reproach from everyone except the elders. If reproach from either side doesn’t happen, the Sect is falling apart.” Jin Ling said and Lan XiChen nodded approvingly.

“So, then, why is it up to only the elders to decide whether SiZhui is associated with the Sect? Why doesn’t the Sect Leader or SiZhui himself have a say in it?”

“That’s what I’m asking.” Jin Ling said with a frown. “Although Lan SiZhui’s exclusion is sort of understandable, but you’re Sect Leader.”

“I am also known to have enabled SiZhui in the past.” Lan XiChen said. “If I were to advocate for SiZhui’s case, would they not see me as someone too partial in this matter?”

“Hm.” Jin Ling frowned.

“What does it matter if you are?” Lan JingYi asked.

“Remember what I said. The Sect Leader answers the elders just as much as the elders answer the Sect Leader – if they find that I’m trying to gain favor for a friend of mine, how could I judge situations justly?”

“This is why you and Lan WangJi also got punished.” Jin Ling said. “If Lan XiChen opposed the elders, they would’ve found him incapable and this could’ve led to them removing him from the position of Sect Leader, which would lead to a whole lot of issues, mostly resulting in the Sect dispersing.”

“This is why it’s important to find the right balance and keep yourself in check.” Lan XiChen nodded in agreement. “Unless you’re willing to risk the future of the entire Sect.”

“Oh.” Lan JingYi said, looking over and studying Jin Ling’s profile.

“Stop staring. The Jin Sect is fine.” Jin Ling glared back. “One word regarding my personality and I’ll seriously hit you.”

“It’s not that.” Lan JingYi said calmly. “It’s just since you took over the Sect, it had been weeks and Koi Tower still stands. Is it because the elders are scared they’re going to get beheaded, or are you actually a good Sect Leader?”

“Lan JingYi.” Jin Ling snarled. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“So, when will the elders decide this?” He asked before his two friends could get out of hand.

“I’ll have to talk to them first.” Lan XiChen smiled tiredly. “Also report on what went down during the month I was away and hear their report as well. I imagine it would take a day at least, if not more. There’s also the issue of the Su Clan hanging over our heads.”

“Until then, what are we to do?” Jin Ling asked with a frown. “Just sit and meditate?” He then suddenly turned to Lan SiZhui. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea. You should go to Cold Pond Cave and meditate.”

“Only disciples of the Lan Sect are allowed back there.” Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“SiZhui, your condition—”

“Is not getting worse as long as I don’t use demonic cultivation.” Lan SiZhui cut him off. Jin Ling scowled at him.

“I mean, won’t it?” Lan JingYi asked next. Lan SiZhui turned to him. “You could at least go to the Cold Spring. It is not strictly forbidden for guests to visit and it is also located on Xiawu. Its healing powers are strong.”

Lan SiZhui considered it. When him and Jin Ling fled from the Koi Tower and stopped for the night to camp, they rested beside a lake. Looking at it, Lan SiZhui thought of the healing springs of Cloud Recesses and recalled how nice it would be on his mangled back. With a sigh, he turned to Lan XiChen.

“Sect Leader Lan, I would like to request access to the Cold Spring.” He asked politely. Lan XiChen simply nodded.

“There’s no issue with this.” He said. “However, before you go, I came to a decision. Today we arrived early, but it is no matter. JingYi, I release you from your punishment for the rest of the day; at curfew you may return, but until then, you can stay out. I would like the three of you to spend this time to decide if you would like to stay or go back to the future. It can be an individual decision; however, I think you all should talk about this together first.”

“I think it should be a decision made together.” Lan JingYi looked over the two of them. “Like when we decided to help out here in the past.”

“SiZhui only agreed because he didn’t want us to go off on our own.” Jin Ling told him with a frown. Lan JingYi shrugged.

“In the end, he still helped out. One of us might be reluctant, but if the rest’s reasoning is sound and just, shouldn’t we make the same sacrifice?”

“Sure.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“Ah, MouShi, if we can’t even agree on this, we will have a hard time deciding whether to stay or not.” Lan JingYi groaned. Jin Ling just shook his head as if he didn’t even want to deal with Lan JingYi right now.

“Until it is time for Lan JingYi to return, you might discuss this in your old rooms. They should still be equipped with talisman paper. I’ll have some servants prepare baths for you and new clothes as well as bring you some food.”

“Alright.” Lan JingYi agreed easily. “Thank you.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen inclined his head, then stood. The three of them rose with him as well. “The elders are waiting for me. Stay here until I send someone for you please.”

“Lan XiChen.” Jin Ling spoke up unexpectedly, and Lan XiChen looked over curiously before opening the door. Once the attention was on him, Jin Ling continued: “Since I’m a guest here now, it is unbecoming to have my weapon taken away.” He held out his hand as if expecting Lan XiChen to drop Huangfeng into his hand there and then.

Lan XiChen considered this for a long moment. Lan SiZhui was beginning to think the other was going to refuse, but then the Lan Sect Leader inclined his head.

“As you wish. However, please be mindful. Many still fear Huangfeng, especially in your hands. If they see you walking around Cloud Recesses with it, they might take it the wrong way.”

“Right.” Jin Ling bit out. “Sure. I’m not stupid, I know this myself.”

“Of course.” Lan XiChen inclined his head again. “I’ll have the weapon returned to you promptly.” With this, he stepped out of the room, closing the door carefully behind himself.

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Lan SiZhui’s rooms were untouched. He gazed over the room with fondness and an ache that had nothing to do with his physical wounds. When he left the Sect, he fully committed to his decision. He didn’t think he would never see the Cloud Recesses again, but he didn’t think about the next time he might see it either. He ought to ask Lan XiChen how come this room was always free. Even when they first appeared here, the room was empty, even though it was one of the bigger rooms of the disciple’s dormitories. When Lan SiZhui moved into it in the future, it was convenient, since the disciple who lived here previously just married and moved to somewhere else. This happened about a day before Lan SiZhui was due to move into the disciples’ quarters, there was not really a question about where he would be housed.

He was thankful for the opportunity to bathe and eat before him and the others talked. He needed a little time to rest. Everything hurt and Lan SiZhui wished he could already go to the

Cold Springs, in hopes that the healing lakes of the Cloud Recesses would soothe his sore back.

He found that there were, indeed, clothes prepared for him by the privacy screen in front of the bath. In Moling he received light blue robes without any embroidery – now he received slightly darker blue robes, also without any embroidery, but on the inside some protection talismans were weaved into the fabric. Lan SiZhui felt slightly better in them after he bathed. Unlike in the inn, here in Cloud Recesses he received proper soap and almost hot water, with a talisman secured to the tub to keep it warm as well. For a long time he just soaked, then he figured Jin Ling and Lan JingYi would come to him soon and so he quickly finished bathing, then sat down to eat before his friends arrived. It was just as well, because as soon as he finished, there was a knock on his door.

“Come in.” He invited without standing, feeling comfortable for the first time since he was brought to the Koi Tower. The door opened and Jin Ling and Lan JingYi entered, a guard behind them glancing inside before the door closed.

“Ah, SiZhui, you look better.” Lan JingYi smiled. Lan SiZhui just pressed his lips together and gestured his friends to sit. Before Lan JingYi did so, he went over to the shelf and picked up some talisman papers and quickly, still standing at the shelf, drew a silencing talisman and applied it.

“Cloud Recesses hospitality is generous.” Jin Ling said as Lan JingYi finally sat down as well. “Giving talisman paper and ink to criminals.”

“Lan XiChen knows we wouldn’t do anything to harm anyone here.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “The only reason we have guards following us everywhere is because this gives the others the peace of mind, not because we’re dangerous.”

“Right.” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Anyways, you never told me what happened after they took you, I expect a full report.” He said, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at the two of them expectantly. Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but then began to tell his tale. Lan SiZhui listened just as attentively as he had previously. Lan JingYi didn’t cut in although at times he looked like he wanted to. Once Jin Ling was done, he turned to Lan SiZhui. “What about you?”

Lan SiZhui hesitated. Jin Ling was also looking at him in anticipation, even he hadn’t heard this. In the end, knowing he couldn’t avoid talking about this forever, Lan SiZhui began. He told them how he was taken to the dungeon, then brushed over his first punishment. His two friends exchanged a look, noting he didn’t say exactly what his punishment was. But Lan SiZhui continued, telling them he developed a small fever and was in-and-out of it for a while, then the nurse came to treat him, and Lan JingYi and Jin Ling didn’t comment, listening to his tale for now.

He told them how after his first meal down there he heard Wang LingJiao speak up, and this was how he learned about General Wu’s presence as well. At this, Jin Ling frowned deeply. Seeing this, Lan SiZhui paused.

“What is it?” He asked. Lan JingYi also looked over at Jin Ling.

“You’re saying that general who we encountered in YiLing when freeing the Wen siblings, whom my father took to the camp to be questioned, ended up in the same prison?” Lan SiZhui nodded at Jin Ling’s question. “That’s odd.”

“How so?” Asked Lan JingYi.

“Well, the war prisoners we took were to be questioned. If they couldn’t offer anything of use immediately, they were sent back to Lotus Pier to be questioned by Madam Yu. When the deal was made in Nightless City, they were to be executed, for this, I thought they sent out notices to those who held such prisoners. Most of them were caught in Qishan, so those were to be executed in the Nightless City after the war, but those who were held elsewhere, I thought their keepers were in charge of executing them. So, for Jin GuangShan to get hold of the general, he must’ve changed the letter not to execute those prisoners but to be sent to Koi Tower to have them executed. This means Jiang FengMian had to know they broke the deal even before this whole thing was revealed in the cave.”

“And?” Lan JingYi asked, not seeing the point. Lan SiZhui saw it neither.

“And nothing.” Jin Ling frowned at him. “It’s either that Jiang FengMian didn’t care, or he is so complacent he thought Jin GuangShan had a good reason for it and let him.”

“I still don’t get why this is relevant.” Lan JingYi shook his head. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“It’s that kind of thing I note because I’m Sect Leader, and you don’t understand because you’re not. Was I Sect Leader at this time, this would mean a weak leadership in the Jiang Sect, which could be exploited, would the need arose.”

“And he says the title MouShi doesn’t fit him.” Lan JingYi said, aimed at Lan SiZhui.

“Leave me out of this.” Lan SiZhui asked, and indeed, Jin Ling glared at Lan JingYi angrily.

“Anyways, SiZhui, please continue.” Lan JingYi said, glancing over at Jin Ling pointedly. The other rolled his eyes but also continued to listen.

Lan SiZhui told them about the Jin questioning the two Wen prisoners about Lan SiZhui’s involvement with the Wen, how they were not surprised by Wang LingJiao’s claim that Lan SiZhui was from the future. He told them about Wen RuoHan’s original plan, which, all of them agreed was flawed from the start. He didn’t tell them he found out who his father was in reality, but he did tell them about the suspicious humming. He told them about Jin GuangYao’s visit, at which point Jin Ling kept rolling his eyes and snorting, annoyed. He told them how the rising resentful energy eventually killed Wang LingJiao, and how he tried to stop it but was unsuccessful. He told them about Lan XiChen’s brief visit, then after that, there was not much to tell. He was certainly not telling them about the resentful energy whispering to him, so he said from here on out, his story was the same as Jin Ling’s when he told Lan JingYi about their escape.

“They kept you in such horrible conditions...” Lan JingYi looked at him sadly. Lan SiZhui shrugged his shoulders the best he could.

“At least I’m alive.”

“Not like the YiLing Patriarch had been in his time.” Jin Ling said, nodding. “I’m glad you didn’t follow entirely in his footsteps. I don’t need even more uncles.”

“Jin Ling.” Lan JingYi groaned at the attempted humor, if one could call Jin Ling’s comment that.

“What about you, JingYi?” Lan SiZhui asked his friend, eager to know.

“Ah, it’s not nearly as busy as you have been!” Lan JingYi waved a dismissive hand. Then he suddenly froze and looked at Lan SiZhui with wide eyes.

“Hm?” Lan SiZhui asked when Lan JingYi didn’t move for a long time.

“Ah, actually, SiZhui... Ah, I won’t tell you. It’s not my place.” He said, sounding strange. A little angry, a little excited. Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling exchanged a look. “Hey, ask Lan XiChen about what happened after the Nightless City. He should be the one to tell you.” He said seriously. Lan SiZhui blinked and nodded, lack of better response. Lan JingYi relaxed and nodded. “Good. Anyways, after that all, we began our journey back.

“So, once we got back to the Cloud Recesses, me and Lan WangJi were made to kneel in front of the Lanshi while the elders and Lan XiChen spoke. They came to a decision fairly quickly. Then they came out and Lan XiChen told us we were to receive two strikes with the discipline whip and a year of seclusion. And also...” He trailed off, frowning. “Lan XiChen then spoke up, surprising everyone. He said since it was him who had allowed all this to get so out of hand, he should also receive punishment. This didn’t seem like something he discussed with the elders and they also looked surprised. Lan XiChen then turned to them and said... He said he proposes a punishment fit for the Sect Leader who enabled his disciples. That he should be the one to whip us!”

“What?!” Jin Ling exclaimed, slamming his hand on the table. Lan SiZhui wondered if his table was made of metal instead of wood; the amount of times Jin Ling slapped it since he came to Cloud Recesses during their own time, it should’ve collapsed by now.

But naturally, his thoughts only took this turn to avoid thinking about the implications of what Lan JingYi said. For one, it was unheard of that the Sect Leader receives any punishment, much less self-inflicted. Then, to whip his own disciples... It was one thing, an obligation to rule out punishment. It was an entirely different affair to administer it himself. Lan XiChen’s personality was serene and peaceful, could he even take this? Surely, he was a cultivator and one of the most successful warrior during the Sunshot Campaign, but hurting enemy and hurting his own were vastly different. For him to take this, it was truly a punishment fit for a Sect Leader. Lan SiZhui couldn’t even imagine the amount of guilt this would carry.

Did this happen in Lan SiZhui’s time as well? Was it Lan XiChen who whipped Lan WangJi?

“I’m not lying.” Lan JingYi told Jin Ling. “He said this and when finally, the elders calmed down, they discussed it. In the end, they agreed, if only to ease Lan XiChen’s assumed guilt over enabling his disciples.”

“Don’t tell me he actually whipped you.” Jin Ling said. “If the Sects hear about this...”

“They won’t.” Lan JingYi told him. “Everyone in the courtyard back then was sworn secrecy.”

“Why did you tell us then?” Jin Ling scoffed.

“I have to talk about it! It’s crazy!”

“Crazy is right!” Jin Ling said.

“That’s what I’m saying! Anyways. I don’t know how a whipping is supposed to feel like with the discipline whip, but, and I think everyone knew this was why he asked for this, Lan XiChen went easy on us I think. The first one didn’t even break skin.”

“Of course, that’s why he asked.” Jin Ling frowned. “You think he was going to stand there and watch his little brother be brutally whipped?”

“I don’t know, apparently he has no problem when Lan WangJi is being punished any other way.” Lan JingYi shrugged.

“Because your Sect is actually full of crazy people who are so fucking used to punishment!” Jin Ling threw up his hands.

“We have a lot of rules.” Lan JingYi said defensively. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“So, this is what happened.” Lan SiZhui said and Lan JingYi turned back to him, nodding.

“Yes. Afterwards, we were sent into seclusion. Then one night, someone broke into my room. I was about to go to sleep, and his entrance caught me by surprise. By the time I realized what happened, he attacked me. We struggled a bit, then he knocked me out. I woke in that cave. He kept me there for a whole day, without even giving me food, then when he finally came back, he stayed for the entire day as well. He gave me some awful food. Then, you two showed up, and from here, you know what happened.”

“I still can’t believe Su She managed to kidnap you.” Jin Ling shook his head as if disappointed. Lan JingYi threw him an annoyed look.

“I told you already. There wasn’t much I could do about it.”

“It’s embarrassing is all.” Jin Ling said. “From one of the heroes of the Sunshot Campaign to be bested by a Su disciple...”

“You—!” Lan JingYi glared at him, but at this, Lan SiZhui sighed.

“We’re relieved you’re alright though.” Lan SiZhui said. Turning to him, Lan JingYi huffed, crossing his arms across his chest and lifting his chin.

“Thank you.”

“Gosh, seriously.” Jin Ling sighed.

“Alright, instead of listening to your bitching, how about we talk about actually relevant things?” Lan JingYi asked.

“‘Bitching’?” Jin Ling looked at him with wide eyes. “Did you just say ‘bitching’?”

“JingYi is right.” Lan SiZhui inserted with a sigh. “We should concentrate on the topic at hand. ZeWu-Jun asked us to talk about this. We should.”

“About going back?” Lan JingYi asked. Lan SiZhui nodded, looking over at Jin Ling.

“You said you wouldn’t mind staying.”

“It’s not even that I wouldn’t mind.” Jin Ling explained. “As I said, I don’t like here much better. But how would that work, going back to the future? Everything would be different. It took us a long time to understand this time. If we go back, we’ll have to learn how the world changed while we were away once again. Here, at least, we know what things we can or cannot talk about.”

“Well, that’s true I guess.” Lan JingYi said. “But still. Live our whole lives here? I hardly know these people. Back in the future, I at least know some people whom I grew up with. I also know the political landscape and the history as well. Several inventions we used to use don’t even exist yet. Returning to a normal life here... It seems kind of difficult.”

“But we changed things here.” Jin Ling argued. “The future might not even be what we left back then. Despite what Lan XiChen said, about having some kind of magic causing our parents to not name us what they originally named us, how can we know what we go back to? Also, our future was formed by the events we’ve currently changed so much. Who’s to say what we actually go back to? Everything would have changed. Those inventions, some of them were made by the YiLing Patriarch, and he wasn’t even a thing now. Similarly, some inventions were inspired by the fear of him returning. Returning to a normal life, here at least we’ve gotten to know this world a little. Who knows how much the future also changed, going back to that... It would be even harder to deal with that, don’t you think?”

“Well... I mean, you have a point. But that’s the thing.” Lan JingYi said. “We still don’t know how the future changes. What if Lan XiChen is right? What if there is some kind of magic that makes people have a blind spot when it comes to our younger selves? Who knows how *Spring Again* actually works? Not even Lan XiChen could figure it out.”

“What do you have to go back to, even if he’s right? Besides, the future is our future as well. If we go back, wouldn’t it be pointless? We will live through it whether we go back or not.”



“I’m not talking about myself now. Listen to what I’m saying. I said; what if Lan XiChen is right and by some magic, we still live differently over there? What if you really are the Jin Sect’s leader there still? If you don’t go back until then, how can we know the Jin Sect will still have a leader?”

“Jin ZiXuan is alive.” Lan JingYi said. “And he is married to my mother. If they end up having a child as well, then if he dies in the meantime, the child is going to take over, or the elders. How do I come into the picture there at all, especially if this time’s Jin Ling will have a different name, or whatever? I won’t be able to even claim I’m him, just time traveled. And if he has the same name, it would be extremely shady if I just show up and claim I’m him.”

“This conversation didn’t get better in the meantime.” Lan JingYi held his head. “Let’s just call our younger selves something else. I’ll call your younger self Jin RuLan. Don’t make that face. It’s hard to talk about these things without getting confused. So, Jin RuLan grows up here. If his father dies for some reason, he becomes the Sect Leader. But you, Jin Ling, came back from the future to the past. So, Jin RuLan is also going to end up coming back, right?”

“That’s true.” Lan SiZhui agreed, following the logic. He also thought about this while they conversed.

He was on the opinion, that as Lan XiChen also pointed out, without their origins known, it would be much harder to remain part of this world. The Jin wouldn’t take Jin Ling seriously. The Lan, even if Lan SiZhui ended up staying, would not take him back. Unless they told everyone where they’re from, people would always question their persons. Just look what happened with the Wen, how people were quick to believe Lan SiZhui secretly worked with them, because they didn’t know his origins. The cultivation world didn’t forget easily. Even if they all became rouge cultivators, their actions would always be judged based on the things they did back here.

Going back to the future didn’t give them much advantage either. As Jin Ling said, if things really changed so much because of them, they couldn’t just disappear for years and then appear again, not knowing what happened in the meantime. Their resurfacing would also just stir up the memories of what ChunYu-Jun and his people had done in the past, and they would be in the same predicament again.

But at the same time, this was not where they belonged. To live through these times as adults now felt wrong. Even if they never interact with their child selves, the knowledge of there being another version of themselves being out there in the world would always make them question their actions. The future was safer. Their younger self would also disappear to travel in time, and them returning... Maybe Lan XiChen’s point of the magic making people still bring them up the same, would it be just like this, them taking their younger selves’ place in the future? Making it seem like they never disappeared, while in reality they time traveled?

“Think about it, Jin Ling. We’re here, so our future selves, Jin RuLan, by JingYi’s line of thought, would come back to the past, just like our child selves.” He gestured at Lan JingYi and himself. “So, even though we don’t really know what future we would go back to, whether our names would be the same or not, we know this for sure. This means that Jin RuLan won’t be there in the future, just like you’re not back in the future, taking care of the Sect. If we don’t go back, this circle will just continue.”

“So, if we don’t go back now, the Jin Sect remains without a Sect Leader. Eventually the elders would also realize I’m gone and chose my eldest blood relative to take over my duties as Sect Leader. If I don’t return, they’ll just end up becoming the new gentry.”

“Do you really want that?” Lan JingYi asked with a frown.

“Why not?” Jin Ling shrugged. “It’s not like being a Sect Leader is all I’m capable of.”

“I mean...” Lan JingYi made a face, and Jin Ling rolled his eyes, preparing to talk back. Before he could, though, Lan JingYi quickly spoke up. “It’s not that. It’s just, you’re mainly a politician, not a cultivator. Me and SiZhui, we would be fine, because we’re mainly cultivators, not politicians. But for you to stuck here, what would you even do?”

“As I said...” Jin Ling glared. “Being Sect Leader is not all I’m capable of. I might’ve prepared for this all my life, but I also learned cultivation. I might not be the best at it, but I’m capable of it.”

“I’m not saying you’re not. But are you sure this is what you want to do with your life? Don’t take offense – what am I saying, you will – but you seem to enjoy verbally sparring with others. Wouldn’t cultivation be dull in comparison?”

“It wouldn’t be.” Jin Ling said confidently.

“But what do we have to lose, by traveling to the future?” Lan SiZhui asked, steering the conversation back on topic. “If it turns out your father is still alive and leads the Sect, or that your child self never traveled in time, we could just relearn the layout of the world and continue our lives there, as we would have done here.”

“Do you really want to go back so desperately?” Jin Ling asked him. Lan SiZhui shrugged. “Remember, your family is still out there somewhere. They might still be in danger. Wouldn’t you prefer to go to them and help them out?”

“I would.” Lan SiZhui agreed. “However, I’ve interfered with their lives enough as it is. While I would want to go back and help them... I’m a criminal now. Many people want to kill me or worse. If they find me with my family...” Lan SiZhui bowed his head. “I think right now it is much more dangerous for them if I’m with them than if I’m not.”

“And being here would be a constant incentive for you to go to them.” Jin Ling nodded slowly, following Lan SiZhui’s line of thought. Lan SiZhui nodded. “In that regard, I can understand this. As long as my parents alive, I’d also want to be near them. However, they would look unfavorably at this, and also would carry some danger with it.”

“Me too.” Lan JingYi said sadly. “If I was here still when my parents went on that night-hunt...”

“Well, to me this sounds like we’ve all made our decisions.” Jin Ling said after a beat, looking over the two of them. Lan SiZhui nodded, so did Lan JingYi. “We go back to the future.”



Lan JingYi had to return to his punishment before curfew. Him and Jin Ling stayed in Lan SiZhui's rooms until then, just talking about their theories of what future awaited them, or about their experiences while they were apart. They spoke until there was a knock on the door. Jin Ling went over and opened it, revealing a guard standing there. He bowed to Jin Ling, then informed them curfew was approaching and the others should return where they belonged. Begrudgingly, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling agreed.

Once they left, Lan SiZhui felt strangely lonely. Being alone had never been an issue for him, but ever since they came to the past, there were not many times he was left alone to his own devices. He decided to have some tea. It had been a while since he had some proper tea and he enjoyed the simple motions of preparing it, then the sweet taste of it.

Eventually though it was time to sleep. Lan SiZhui ignored his bed, his back still aching. He stayed in front of his table, trying to meditate.

The night was long and uneventful. Lan SiZhui fell asleep at one point, but not for long. It went on like this until it was time that everyone began to wake, sounds of disciples going to their morning classes loud in front of Lan SiZhui's rooms. From the window, he heard pieces of conversation tickle inside. Thankfully, the Lan disciples were either mindful his room was here, or just kept themselves to the rules and didn't gossip about him right here; instead Lan SiZhui heard them talking about cultivation or history, whatever fancied the disciples that time.

Once most of them left, Lan SiZhui stood and went over to his door. He opened it and looked around, spotting the guard standing a respectful distance away from his door.

"Sir," Lan SiZhui addressed him and the guard turned, looking mildly surprised by Lan SiZhui's appearance.

"Ah, ChunYu-Jun. Excuse us for the delay. Breakfast will be by shortly."

"It's not that." Lan SiZhui shook his head, surprised he was also getting breakfast. Although Lan XiChen did say he was a guest here for now. "I wanted to ask you – yesterday morning ZeWu-Jun gave me permission to visit the Cold Spring."

"Yes." The guard nodded, looking over towards the main buildings. "Ah, your breakfast will be by shortly, then you go ahead."

"Mn. Do I..." Lan SiZhui was unsure what the etiquette was regarding this. He had never been a guest in the Cloud Recesses. He was usually at home here. "Can I skip breakfast and just go there?" He asked shyly. The guard made a face, looking over him quickly.

"Please, have breakfast first, sir. Sect Leader Lan gave us orders to give you three meals a day."

At this, Lan SiZhui was a little disappointed. "Right. Sorry. I don't want to get you into trouble." He paused. Then, he asked: "Are you also getting breakfast?"

“Uh... After you’ve eaten, I’ll be released by the brother who brings breakfast and I’ll go eat then.”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I’ll wait inside then.”

He did indeed. Not long after this interaction, there was a knock on Lan SiZhui’s door. A different guard was there with a tray in his hand. Lan SiZhui thanked him and returned to the table to eat his breakfast. Afterwards, he approached this guard as well.

“Sir, yesterday morning ZeWu-Jun gave me permission to go to the Cold Springs. Can I go there now?”

“Sure.” The guard nodded, gesturing towards the path. “I assume ChunYu-Jun knows the way.”

“Yes, thank you.” Lan SiZhui nodded, and headed that way, the guard following, not closely, but close enough that would anyone see them, they would know what the other man’s purpose behind Lan SiZhui was. Soon they arrived to the Cold Springs, where Lan SiZhui glanced back at the guard. He was actually standing with his back to Lan SiZhui, who appreciated the privacy. He stripped and stepped into the cold water, hissing at the temperature. Even though it was already spring, the mountain lake was still ice cold. Without his spiritual powers, he really felt the temperature now.

Despite this, the water of the Cold Spring felt incredibly soothing on Lan SiZhui’s sore back. The positive energy was strong here. As Lan SiZhui submerged himself into the water, it was almost like he could feel the healing effects this had on him, although this was impossible without his spiritual power circulating in his meridians. He closed his eyes and meditated, enjoying being at peace for now.



Lan XiChen summoned him two days later. These two days Lan SiZhui spent meditating in the Cold Spring or having meals with Jin Ling, who was also anxious about the elders’ decision regarding Lan SiZhui. As he entered the Hanshi after he was given permission, Lan SiZhui saw Lan XiChen was smiling at him, relaxed, so he also felt much more relaxed. Although it was strange he was here alone, he didn’t question this. He bowed to the Sect Leader, then to his prompting sat. Lan XiChen poured him tea, then after the first sip, he looked at Lan SiZhui.

“SiZhui, thank you for coming.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him as well.

“SiZhui, a few days ago, I asked you, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi to decide whether you’d like to stay. Have you managed to come to a decision?”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “We thoroughly thought it through. We came to a decision.”

“I see.” Lan XiChen nodded. “What is it?”

“We’ve decided to go back to the future. We figured, whatever the future is like now, we’d like to return to our old life the best we could, if it’s at all possible. If not, we’ll have to start a new life here anyways, so there would be no point not going, since we’d have to start a new life over there as well.”

“Very well.” Lan XiChen nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer. Lan SiZhui wondered whether the Lan Sect Leader had different reasons to want them in the future than the three of them. Surely, Lan XiChen had insight into things the three of them didn’t. He still wondered what it could be that prompted such an interest in their fate. Also thinking about it, he remembered that the last time they spoke, Lan JingYi had something regarding Nightless City he wanted Lan XiChen to share instead. Lan SiZhui wanted to ask, but saw that Lan XiChen had something else to say as well, so he waited.

“SiZhui, I’ve also talked to the elders.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui acknowledged, anxious to know the results. “What did they say?”

“They debated for a long time. Not once did I have to interfere to convince them about something. However, in the end, they have made their decision. SiZhui, the elders wish nothing to do with you. I’m sorry.” Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and shrugged the best he could.

“I’m sorry as well.”

“Unfortunately, this means that you cannot return to the Sect. However, this also means they will not administer any punishment. They’ve also agreed to receive you as a guest of mine, however, they were very strict regarding this. They do not wish you to stay for a moment longer than necessary.”

“Than necessary?” Lan SiZhui asked back, confused. His presence was supposed to be Lan XiChen’s choice, not a necessity.

“Well, the truth is, when I advocated to let you stay here at all as my guest, they refused at first. Didn’t want to hear about it. However, then I revealed to them that you harmed our disciples with the scores of the old Qin language. I’ve argued that since you were the only expert in this language that we know of, you might have a solution to heal these people.”

“Um, ZeWu-Jun, you’ve also heard Wei WuXian in Nightless City. These people were harmed using the Yin Iron. While I used the old Qin language to control the Yin Iron’s energies, the energy harming them still came from the Stygian Tiger Amulet itself... According to Wei WuXian, this is a refined tool, that wields twice the power the raw Yin Iron does. This means that those affected by it are just like those servants Wen RuoHan turned the longest time ago. They could hardly be helped. While I feel sorry for them and would like to help, I’m afraid...”

“Do not worry.” Lan XiChen shook his head. “The truth is, I knew all this when I told this to the elders.”

“But then ZeWu-Jun, why did you still tell them this?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused.

“Because I had to convince the elders, not only to let you stay, but to let you study some related texts as well.” At this, Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened. “This was the only way to convince them.”

“I—” Lan SiZhui began, then cut himself off, not sure what he could even say to this. On one hand he was thankful – on the other, he wondered. Lan XiChen back then didn’t know they’ve decided to stay, so to tell this to the elders and convince them to let Lan SiZhui study the texts, what reason did Lan XiChen have for this? Did he mean to send them back regardless of their decision? What was the point of that? Why was Lan XiChen adamant on sending them back? “ZeWu-Jun, I appreciate this. However, I don’t understand. You didn’t know we would chose to go back... Why would you still convince them?”

Lan XiChen was quiet for a long time, then he sighed. “I have reason to believe you... and the future would benefit from you going back. Even if you decided against it, I have reason to think you’d change your mind. As of right now, it is difficult to explain. The person who convinced me of this asked me not to reveal this until there was no other way.” Seeing Lan SiZhui’s confusion, he pressed his lips together and said: “As I said, it is hard to explain. I’ll need to consult someone about this before I could tell you. Please, don’t think I have an ulterior motive. I only want to do right by you and the world you come from.”

Lan SiZhui didn’t understand this any more than when Lan XiChen began to speak. However, it was not his place to question this, this much he understood, and so he just nodded and said: “Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan XiChen inclined his head, seemingly also thankful Lan SiZhui didn’t ask further questions. There was a lull in the conversation, so Lan SiZhui decided to ask: “ZeWu-Jun, may I ask a question?”

“Of course.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Go ahead.”

“ZeWu-Jun, I was wondering... When I talked to Lan JingYi a few days ago, he suggested I ask you about something. He was telling us what had happened since we’ve been apart. However, before he began, he told me that the events right after Nightless City, I should ask from you, since this was not his place to say. Could you... Would ZeWu-Jun terribly mind telling me?”

“There’s no need to be so formal, SiZhui.” Lan XiChen smiled at him sadly. “After all, we’re friends, are we not?”

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun, I wouldn’t dare!” Lan SiZhui protested. Lan XiChen seemed amused by this.

“You’re no longer my disciple, SiZhui. We’re also the same age.”

“ZeWu-Jun, the truth is, I grew up with you as my Sect Leader. To disregard this, it makes me extremely uncomfortable. Please, don’t ask me.” He begged. Lan XiChen actually chuckled at this! He hid it with the sleeve of his robes, but Lan SiZhui could still tell.

“Alright, alright SiZhui. I won’t force you.” He said, then amusement faded and he sighed heavily. “It might even be better, for what I’m about to tell you, it might cause you to be upset with me.”

“ZeWu-Jun?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused. What could be so bad? “Lan JingYi refused to tell me. Please, tell me.”

At this, Lan XiChen sighed again, but nodded nonetheless. His tale went like this:

When Jin GuangShan left, Lan XiChen pulled Jin ZiXuan aside to talk to him. Lan XiChen asked him this:

“Young Master Jin, I know this is unbefitting of me, however, I’m worried about my former disciple and your own. What they say might sound ridiculous sometimes, but they’re rarely wrong. You also know that the Wen whom SiZhui tried to protect were mere farmers and healers. For your father to go after them so harshly, I’m afraid Jin Ling’s worries regarding their treatment in Koi Tower are not entirely unfounded. I’d like to ask you to look after them the best you can. I realize this is not easy, since you’ll also be busy with your wedding preparations.”

“Sect Leader Lan, you’re right. I’ll be busy.” Jin ZiXuan agreed, then sighed. “But I’ll do my best, if this is what Sect Leader Lan wishes. We’ve worked together before and I trust your judgement.”

“That’s all I can ask. Thank you.” Here, Jin ZiXuan attempted to bow to him; however, Lan XiChen stopped him. “ZiXuan. Are we not sworn brothers? Please, don’t bow to me.” At this, Jin ZiXuan seemed uncomfortable but nodded, then with a curt goodbye, went back over to his father’s side.

They all left soon, but the Lan Sect stayed, waiting for all the Clans to leave. Once they have, Lan XiChen turned to his disciples.

“Please, play Cleansing and make sure the Nightless City is free of lingering resentful energy. I do not wish to leave this place fester as the Burial Mounds have.” At this, his disciples readily agreed. They left with only one disciple staying behind as a guard. Lan XiChen ignored him as he turned to Lan JingYi and Lan WangJi. Lan JingYi seemed to be sulking for being denied to go with the Jin Sect, but in reality, Lan XiChen had no other choice. “JingYi, sorry about that.” He said apologetically, though the other didn’t seem to care. Lan XiChen decided to leave the apology for another time then, and instead, asked: “You still have Hudie, do you not?”

“Of course, I have it.” Lan JingYi said, not moving to retrieve it.

“Please, hand it over then.”

“So, I’m also a prisoner, like Jin Ling?” He asked. Lan XiChen didn’t know what to make of this.

“You’re not a prisoner. However, Hudie is still contaminated with the Yin Iron. Its resentful energy can be harmful even for a disciple whose meridians and Golden Core are intact. I do not wish to destroy it, for SiZhui’s spiritual guqin is also involved, however, it should be better kept than a qiankun pouch.” He told Lan JingYi. The other seemed to find logic in this and reluctantly handed it over. Lan XiChen thanked him, then ordered the last remaining disciple to cast protection spells onto it, as well as applying several evil-suppressing talismans onto it before bagging it back into the evil suppressing qiankun pouch Lan JingYi put it into.

Once this was done, Lan XiChen decided they were going to spend the night here and tasked the disciple to find suitable housing. Lan JingYi was placed under a guard all night. In the morning the guard reported he tried to break out twice, but was stopped in his attempts. After they ate from their own travel rations, since they didn’t wish to exploit the citizens of Qishan, they gathered in the courtyard. Then, Lan XiChen turned to Lan WangJi and Lan JingYi.

“We’re not going home just yet. WangJi, JingYi, after Lady Wen’s death, Wen QiongLin ran away from Qishan. I’d like you to take us to the place where the Wen are hiding.” At this, Lan JingYi got angry.

“What are you planning to do?! Kill them yourself?” Naturally, this was a ridiculous idea, and Lan XiChen was saddened to know Lan JingYi would think such things of him. However, Lan WangJi knew better and agreed, so soon they set off.

Arriving to the village via sword, they discovered the Wen still there indeed, standing in a circle on the main square of the village. At the head of the mob stood Wen QiongLin with a spiritual sword, Wen issued, but not his.

At this, Lan SiZhui remembered in the village they found a spiritual sword, which must’ve belonged to the cultivators who lived here before they were taken, and the Wen argued over whether to use the sword or not.

Seeing the mob gathered, Lan XiChen looked over and saw a pitiful sight of elderly and young, gathered to protect themselves from what they must’ve thought was an invasion. At the sight of Wen QiongLin, Lan XiChen recalled what he knew of the Dafan branch of the Wen Sect. It was founded by one of Wen RuoHan’s cousins, one he was close to. When Wen RuoHan and his siblings were fighting for the throne, this cousin fled with his brothers to not be caught up. At the time, it was rumored Wen RuoHan himself sent him away, since they were close and Wen RuoHan wanted to protect him. The eldest of the brothers who fled there led the Clan until an unusual accident happened and he was killed. He had two children, his eldest succeeding him, this was Wen Qing. Since she was dead, now Wen QiongLin was her successor.

“Clan Leader Wen.” Lan XiChen greeted him politely with a bow. Once he straightened, he saw that this surprised Wen QiongLin. “I am Lan XiChen, Sect Leader of the GusuLan. We met briefly during the Lan guest lectures.”

“I remember.” Wen QiongLin confirmed, although his voice was wavering with nerves. Because of this, Lan XiChen saw it best if there were not this many ears listening in.



“Clan Leader Wen, me and my disciples came to discuss, not to fight. May we speak somewhere private, while my disciples take a rest here?” He asked for permission. Even though the Wen invaded this village, since it was already abandoned, it was as good as belonging to them now.

“We may.” Wen QiongLin agreed. Lan XiChen ordered his disciples to wait there and rest. He also quietly asked one of them to go over to a nearby town and buy some food, for the people around here looked malnourished. He then followed as Wen QiongLin led him to a building. Entering, the smell of medicine was clear, but Lan XiChen didn’t question it as they sat at the table there, the chairs creaking under their weight.

“I would offer tea, but we don’t have any.” Wen QiongLin said. Lan XiChen didn’t mind and said so as well.

“Clan Leader Wen, as I said, I came to discuss something personal. I understand that Lan SiZhui acted in your defense in the past few months. I’m not willing to undo his hard work. Instead, I’m here to offer advice, would you accept.”

“Advice?” Wen QiongLin asked back.

“Mn.” Lan XiChen confirmed. “You have never expected to become a Clan Leader, and your Clan had also always been secluded from the world. You’re not aware of the current politics, which is understandable. However, this is important for you to know. After you’ve left the Nightless City, an agreement was made. Since Lady Wen died, the Sects no longer see your Clan as a threat. However, this is only their official stance in this matter. Would you come across them, who knows what excuse they would come up with to eradicate your Clan.

“I know your personality somewhat and I know you’re not a vengeful person. I commend that, and I’m making my suggestion based on this. Please know that would you decide to take revenge, I would not appreciate it and might end up fighting you, despite seeing you as someone to protect right now.

“Clan Leader Wen, your Clan is in danger, no matter how far you run. However, it is not solely because of the surname you share. If only that was the issue, you could just change it or deny it. However, since you’ve been to Nightless City, people also know your face now, even if they haven’t before, and can identify your people based on this. This is good news for your Clan, but bad news for you.

“Naturally, the choice is yours. I wouldn’t suggest you to do something just because I feel it is the right thing to do.”

“Sect Leader Lan, I appreciate your advice.” Wen QiongLin said. “However, I don’t understand it.”

At this, Lan XiChen was amused, but since this was a serious topic and grave time in Wen QiongLin’s life, he didn’t show. “I’m talking about leaving your Clan, Clan Leader Wen. This is not an easy decision to make. I had to make this decision once myself, although my hand was forced. For the safety of your people, sometimes a leader has to sacrifice his own person.”

“I see.” Wen QiongLin said and seemed deep in thought. Lan XiChen waited for him to say something else. “Sect Leader Lan, I haven’t been a Clan Leader long. I don’t know what protecting my people entails. However, I do know that my sister and Lan SiZhui did their best to protect us and because of this, they both suffered a lot, so I understand this. If this is what it takes, I’ll leave my people.”

“It is your decision.” Lan XiChen emphasized. “If you stay, you might not even encounter the Sects. This town is out of sight and if you don’t venture far, you could even maybe live your lives here.”

“Mn.” Wen QiongLin seemed to think hard again. “But cultivators lived here, and several other people also know we’re here. I don’t think Lan SiZhui’s friends would talk, but...”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen hummed approvingly, admiring how fast Wen QiongLin could start thinking about these things like a Clan Leader. It seemed like he was worried for no reason – Wen QiongLin might have fell into this role unexpectedly, but he was not helpless, nor witless.

“So, we will definitely leave here. I don’t know where we will go. I’ll maybe even heed Sect Leader Lan’s advice and leave on my own. Maybe take my grandmother and little cousin with me. They’re the only ones left of my immediate family now.” He said sadly.

“Your little cousin...” Lan XiChen started, carefully testing his willingness to share.

“A-Yuan.” Wen QiongLin answered with a fond smile.

“I see.” Lan XiChen said, then he stood. Based on the commotion outside, his disciple must’ve returned with the food by now. Wen QiongLin also stood. “Clan Leader Wen—”

“Just Wen Ning. Please. I don’t feel like a Clan Leader. Even sister didn’t like it when people called her Clan Leader.”

“Young Master Wen then.” Lan XiChen settled for a compromise, and Wen QiongLin didn’t seem to mind. “Young Master Wen, Lan SiZhui is also a relative of yours. He had been adopted into the Lan Sect, so he is also a relative of mine. Because of this connection, please, if you ever need help, do not hesitate to reach out. You can always find me in the Cloud Recesses.”

“Sect Leader Lan, if the Sects realize you’re helping us...”

“Since there’s the agreement, I wouldn’t break any unwritten conduct. Also, it is included in the rules of the Lan Sect. We do not hesitate to help those who need it.”

“Thank you, Sect Leader Lan.” Wen QiongLin bowed to him, and Lan XiChen also bowed to him, which seemingly made Wen QiongLin uncomfortable. This amused Lan XiChen. As they headed outside, Lan XiChen added:

“We brought back your sister’s body for you. We considered burying her in the Nightless City, but seeing that you’re her closest family, this task and decision should be yours.”

Wen QiongLin seemed to find this disturbing, however, he didn't protest, only thanked him quietly. Lan XiChen found this was a really depressing topic to talk about, and instead said:

"Also, if A-Yuan is interested in cultivation, once he reaches the age of thirteen, know that he would be welcomed to the Lan Sect for training. We also don't turn away ambitious cultivators with talent."

"Ah, we don't know if A-Yuan will be talented in cultivation yet." Wen QiongLin was quick to say. "His parents were healers and farmers."

"I'm confident he will be." Lan XiChen reassured. Then, they had to cease their conversation, seeing the scene that greeted them in the village. The disciple had indeed returned, and the Wen seemed to appreciate the food so much, they've decided to cook it there and then, holding a big feast, including the Lan cultivators as well. This seemed to be mainly Lan JingYi's doing, for he was currently arguing with one of the Wen about how well-cooked a piece of meat was, like they were old friends. Seeing the affection on the Wen's face, they must've been.

Lan XiChen allowed them to have fun and a good meal, although the Lan disciples made sure to take very little of the food they brought and have the Wen most of it. Lan XiChen was proud of them for this.

"So, Wen Ning left?" Lan SiZhui asked once Lan XiChen was finished. Lan XiChen nodded with a sad smile.

"I'm afraid so."

"And you don't know where he went."

"We don't. I sent back some disciples who were with us a couple weeks later, gave them the task that if the Wen were still there, give them some food and money. They came back soon and reported that the village was abandoned. They didn't know where the Wen went."

"I see." Lan SiZhui said, feeling sad about this. It wasn't like he wanted to go back to them, he had already figured it would be dangerous to them. But not to even know where to look for them... At least, they've already decided to go to the future. Not knowing where the Wen were, this was just another reason why Lan SiZhui had no reason to stay. As Lan SiZhui looked up, he saw that Lan XiChen was looking at him with subtle worry etched into his face, so he smiled, hoping to appear reassuring.

"You're taking this better than I thought you would." Lan XiChen commented.

"The truth is, the Wen are probably better off without my protection from now on. Since the Sects don't see a threat in them, my presence would just change that."

"Mn." Lan XiChen hummed thoughtfully. "Maybe."

"Thank you for telling me, ZeWu-Jun."

“I should not have kept it from you in the first place.” Lan XiChen answered. There was a pause as they drank their tea, then Lan SiZhui asked:

“Regarding *Spring Again*...”

“Ah, yes.” Lan XiChen sighed. “The texts are all in the Forbidden Room. In the remaining daylight, I’ll gather everything that might be relevant to the *Collection of Time* and tomorrow you may begin to research. To have you secluded to your room to study would gather too much suspicion, and I wouldn’t be able to provide you with a proper classroom, especially not the Mingshi, for the disciples also need to use it for their studies. But you can study in the library, would you need any other texts. If you require anything from the Forbidden Room, please let me know and I may fetch it for you. Since Jin Ling doesn’t have anything else to do, he may help you. Just make sure you don’t discuss your findings publicly.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded in agreement. “ZeWu-Jun, may I also get a practice guqin? I wouldn’t use it for anything malicious, but sometimes, it is easier to sound out the notes to understand them.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Lan XiChen nodded.

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.”

“No need to thank me.” Lan XiChen told him. “This should have been done when you first arrived.”

“Sorry we didn’t tell you.” Lan SiZhui said, suddenly feeling bad about it. “I wanted to, but... JingYi was scared.”

“He was right to be.” Lan XiChen huffed. “When you came to me with your questions about time travel, I thought this was your way of trying to tell me something. I read too much into it. It was partially my fault for thinking you came back on purpose and not pushing for you to admit it.”

“ZeWu-Jun... May I ask, when we first appeared, what did you think of us? We must’ve acted really strange. JingYi was claiming he was the son of two people who just got married. Jin Ling claimed all kinds of things that never happened yet.”

At this, Lan XiChen grinned, amused. “Well, at first Grandmaster thought you were Wen spies. This is why he ruled fifteen copies of the Lan Sect’s rules. He thought if you weren’t able to do them in time, we would know. I also thought you might be spies. Although it was strange that you tried to convince us with very poor lies, such as Lan JingYi being the son of these two cultivators, I thought you did enough research to know the proper names, you just didn’t know anything else. Lan JingYi’s cryptic message was the first one to make me suspicious about the possibility of time travel.”

“‘The ghost we’ve found is of the past. Ask about Jin Ling’s parents.’ Right?” Lan SiZhui remembered.

“That’s right.” Lan XiChen nodded. “Then at the introduction ceremony, you talked about Jin Ling’s father. By then, I was completely suspicious. Then you came to me and asked about this, so it was confirmed to me.” He smiled good-naturedly.

“We really weren’t subtle back then.” Lan SiZhui made a face. Lan XiChen chuckled.

“No, not really. But, as I said, I thought you wanted to relay a message with your questions, making me look up *Spring Again*. I thought this was how you wanted to let me know where you were truly from. Thinking this, I also thought there was a reason you didn’t just tell me. I thought you must’ve come back under orders not to tell anyone, but that you needed some kind of help and that’s why you tried to make me realize on my own. You were missing from your classes quite a lot. Your tardiness would’ve been noted, so I thought maybe this is why you needed my help, to have you excused from your classes. I convinced Grandmaster you were researching something, that’s why you couldn’t attend them. I thought this was what you wanted anyways.” Lan XiChen huffed, shaking his head in self-deprecation.

“We didn’t mislead you on purpose.” Lan SiZhui said, feeling his cheeks heat in embarrassment.

“Oh, I know.” Lan XiChen waved him off. “I don’t mind. Don’t worry about it.”

“But thank you for your help with Grandmaster.” Lan SiZhui added.

“WangJi was also concerned regarding your persons. They were very concerned that I didn’t seem concerned.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui held back a smile on his own. Then, Lan XiChen sighed.

“Anyhow, it is getting late.” He said. They began this conversation in the late afternoon, and by now the Hanshi had become darker. “I still have to collect the volumes for you. Tomorrow morning, please report to the library when first class begins. I’ll send message about this to Jin Ling as well, so if he wants to join, he may.”

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui stood as he did as well. “We appreciate the help. Current and past as well.”

“Mn.” Lan XiChen smiled at him, then he was dismissed.

## Empathy II.

The next day Lan SiZhui arrived in front of the library as the other disciples went to their own classes. Seeing Lan SiZhui going towards the library, many began to whisper to each other quietly as they headed to their classrooms. Lan SiZhui watched them, then was surprised to see Jin Ling out as well. He was dressed in the same type of clothes Lan SiZhui was. He was not carrying Huangfeng, but he did have a qiankun pouch hanging from his belt, so Lan SiZhui suspected that was where he kept his bow hidden.

As Jin Ling reached him, they greeted each other.

“So, we’re really doing this.” Jin Ling said. Lan SiZhui nodded. “I don’t know how much help I will be, but even this beats hanging around the guest rooms, doing nothing.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed in understanding. However, then they stopped conversing, for the next moment Lan XiChen showed up. He smiled at them as he also arrived to the library.

“Good morning.” He greeted. The two returned it, then Lan XiChen headed inside the library. A disciple was already inside, looking through some shelves. Seeing the Sect Leader, he bowed. Lan XiChen inclined his head in acknowledgement, but didn’t pay him any mind as he led the two of them plus their guards towards the western reading room. This room was not as frequented as the main reading room, where the library’s entrance led.

The western wing was where malignant spells’ descriptions and records were kept. Unless one got an exercise where they needed to figure out how to deal with such spells, this wing was not used often, seeing the most often disciples encountered these while night-hunting, this was mainly used during their training. Lan SiZhui felt bad about sectioning this off from those students, but Lan XiChen didn’t seem concerned, so he figured this had been arranged somehow.

Now the western reading room’s tables held several unusual things. There was a guqin on one table, a nondescript practice guqin Lan SiZhui used to use before he received Hudie. On the other tables, several spider-webbed books and scrolls rested. As they entered, the guards stopped at the doorway, not coming inside as Lan XiChen led Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling to the far table.

“This is where I put *The Collection of Time* as well as the corresponding volumes.” He told them, gesturing at the pile. He then gestured around the room, pointing out different tables. “Over there are early recordings of the Qin language. There are studies of musical cultivation in general. Here is some of the Lan Sect’s history, especially cultivation related. Jin Ling.” He turned to the other. “While I trust you and know you’re also associated with the Lan Sect through SiZhui, as a Sect Leader, I do have to request you do not look at these texts. They include Sect material that should not even be shared with disciples.”

“I understand.” Jin Ling nodded.

“Thank you.” Lan XiChen smiled at him. “SiZhui, the guqin you requested is here. I’ve requested some senior disciples to ward off this wing of the library, so any spiritual energy expressed in the vicinity would not trigger any sounds. They also applied evil-repelling wards, as well as silencing wards. However, please keep in mind that this is a public building, would anyone need anything from this wing, we cannot deny them.”

“Of course, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui nodded, now understanding this wing was not sectioned off from other students, they simply shared the space, trusting that the Lan Sect’s disciples would act righteously. “Thank you for all this.”

“You’re welcome.” Lan XiChen nodded to them with a smile. “Hopefully, you’ll be able to figure this out.”

“Sure, the Lan Sect Leader couldn’t figure it out, so we certainly have a chance.” Jin Ling noted sarcastically. Lan XiChen pressed his lips together, inclining his head in acknowledgement.

“I’ll leave you to it now. As always, you cannot eat here, so please, make sure you break for meals, which will be provided in the dining hall.” He smiled at them. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.” They answered, then bowed as Lan XiChen headed out. Jin Ling sighed and looked around.

“Right. Where do we begin?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui thought, going over to each section of research material Lan XiChen collected. “I’m going to start with *The Collection of Time*. Why don’t you look over these texts about musical cultivation in general?” He asked, opening one of those books. It was one he was sure he had read in the future during his studies, so some of these texts probably didn’t come from the Forbidden Room. “Maybe you’ll notice something that I haven’t thought of before.”

“Alright.” Jin Ling accepted easily. He went over and sat at that table.

“Start with this.” Lan SiZhui recommended as he picked up an easier volume, one designed to help those not part of the Lan Sect learn musical cultivation. Jin Ling accepted and began reading, so Lan SiZhui went over to the table that held *The Collection of Time*. He sat and began.

Back when they first studied *Spring Again*, Lan SiZhui noticed that the song integrated elements of ‘*Summoning*’. ‘*Summoning*’ was part of the collection *Inquiry*. However, the song didn’t only contain this. If that was the case, it wouldn’t have brought them back to the past. Lan SiZhui looked through the score with more experienced eyes than he had before. While he was in the Burial Mounds, he used elements of this old Qin language to create his own scores that would control resentful energy. However, his knowledge of the language was spotty at best, having only been studying a few songs with this language, therefore he wasn’t as experienced with it as people ought to think. He only used common sense to create his own scores, based on what he knew of the old Qin language, and also observing the effect notes had on ghosts, and his studies about the modern version of it.

Now that he had a little better understanding of this language, he had the vague sense that there were not one, but multiple spells woven into this song. He stood and went over to the guqin with the *Collection of Time*, sitting in front of it and preparing to play. As he began, Jin Ling looked up and over from his own book, but then went back to reading, leaving Lan SiZhui to work alone. He played the first verse of the song, listening carefully. He recognized some elements, also recognized ‘*Summoning*’ again as he had in the past. However, there were a few notes that didn’t fit, that Lan SiZhui was sure he himself had used in his own scores.

For a while, he played them again and again, trying to trigger a memory in him that would indicate how they affected the song. However, this was fruitless and soon, he gave up.

Going back to the table, he looked through it, finding some volumes that didn’t seem to be related; however, Lan XiChen put them there, so he was sure they had something to do with *Collection of Time*. He looked over at the tables where early recordings of Qin language and Sect history were. He sighed. This was going to take them a while.

“We don’t have to figure it out today.” Jin Ling murmured from the other table, not looking up from his own book. “We have time now.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui said. “It’s just a bit overwhelming.”

“You’re the ones who pride themselves in doing extensive research on topics.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“Well, there’s a single spell to figure out as we had to do with the Cold Pond Cave. Then there’s the entire history of an ancient Sect’s main spiritual cultivation, which took centuries to perfect.”

“Put it like that, it sounds like we should throttle Lan JingYi the first chance we get.” Lan SiZhui huffed at this, amused, but didn’t comment as he put *Collection of Time* aside. Jin Ling was right. This was something he knew how to do, so he decided to begin from the very beginning. Go through the creation of Qin language first, before trying to figure out the idea behind Spring Again.

Going over, Lan SiZhui sat down at the table that held the cultivation history of the Lan Sect and began to read.

In the normal curriculum, they did have classes that covered this material. However, the books in the public part of the library included volumes that only held methods that have been fully integrated into the Sect’s studies, therefore they didn’t contain every failed attempt, didn’t include the darker side of their history. The volumes from the Forbidden Room were more thorough. These volumes didn’t only describe things Lan SiZhui already knew. There were stories of cultivation methods that had been tried and integrated, then failed. There were failed attempts at new techniques. There were descriptions of methods used at the time of the founding of the Sect, that had since been disregarded, some even pronounced to be more harmful than helpful.



As the day went by, Lan SiZhui read about the long history of his Sect, about how they worked out some methods he never heard of, which could still be in use, but over time had been forgotten. Ancient artifacts were mentioned in one volume, claimed to have gone missing or stolen in the next.

They broke for lunch, then later as dinner came around, they left the library for the day. The next day, they returned to study even more.

It took Lan SiZhui almost the entire week to go through only the history of the Sect's cultivation. His head was so full of knowledge, he felt like his head was constantly spinning. The breaks they took were soothing balm, for they didn't have to learn anything just exist. Lan SiZhui didn't think he ever concentrated so much of his attention on one thing at a time this much in his life. This seemed to be true to Jin Ling as well.

"So, tell me if I'm not understanding this correctly." Jin Ling said at the end of the first week, as they ate lunch under the apple trees, not wanting to sit with the other disciples, receiving odd looks of suspicion and curiosity every time they did so. The seasons were turning and it was warm enough to spend their time outside, so they took advantage that there was no rule against this. Their guards threw an odd look at them the first time they prompted to eat here, but since then, they also seemed to make peace with it, going so far as to also sit in the shade and have quiet discussions every once a while.

"Alright." Lan SiZhui prompted Jin Ling to continue.

"I have to regulate my qi to circulate my body in an even and continuous flow. While I do this, I also have to pay attention to exactly what notes I'm playing at all times. One mistake can be fatal. All while this, I also have to feed a steady stream of spiritual energy into the instrument I'm playing."

"Correct." Lan SiZhui nodded. Jin Ling frowned as he bit into his bread, chewed, then continued:

"And while I do all this, I also have to pay attention to what I'm directing the energy at."

"Yes."

"SiZhui, this is impossible. A person cannot do so many things all at once." Jin Ling said with a flat glare. Lan SiZhui shrugged the best he could.

"This method had been used for generations. There are many expert musical cultivators."

"Listen, musical cultivation isn't unique to your Sect." Jin Ling said. "Even I had to learn a bit. But it was nothing like this. All it said was to feed spiritual energy into it like you would with a sword and that's it."

"Were any of the people you knew who used this method ever successful with musical cultivation?" Lan SiZhui asked pointedly. Jin Ling made a face.

“Alright, fine, they weren’t. So, you’re saying, everyone who is good at musical cultivation can do all that these books describe?”

“Generally, yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “There are people who are better at it than others. JingYi, for example, had always struggled with maintaining a constant steady flow of qi while playing, and he’s also not a good musician.” He admitted. “With more practice, he would be, but he doesn’t care enough to practice.”

“When do you start learning all this then, to be so good at it as you are?” Jin Ling frowned, confused.

“I think it is also important how you begin your cultivation of the Golden Core. It is no coincidence that the Lan Sect is the leading force in this method. Even if you’re not set on the path of musical cultivation, our general cultivation method involves a very steady heart and mind. Even forming your Golden Core requires self-restraint, which is a big part of our musical cultivation, so every Lan disciple, but also everyone who practices cultivation with such restrains, has the potential to become great musical cultivators.

“Since I was taught by Hanguang-Jun, ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster, who are all musical cultivators, I was taught to form my Golden Core using those methods that are required for musical cultivation as well. They always praise me for being a natural talent, but in reality, I’ve always cultivated this way, and I don’t know any other method. This comes to me naturally. For those who don’t learn to cultivate their Golden Core like this, they should also begin to learn at a young age. Hanguang-Jun began practicing not long after his Golden Core formed, in the grief of losing his mother. Since he began almost as soon as he cultivated a Golden Core, it was also easier for him. He has, as I heard, also been a very disciplined person, even as a child, so he already formed his Core in a way that later aided him to perfect musical cultivation. Based on this, I’d say the earlier one starts the better.”

“What about Wei WuXian?” Jin Ling asked next, but Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Wei WuXian doesn’t use music as the Lan do for musical cultivation. However, your question is valid. What about Jin GuangYao, who began to learn *Cleansing* for the sake of Sect Leader Nie, only to later kill him with this method? The explanation is this: once one’s cultivation is high enough, they have a naturally steady flow of qi and control over their spiritual energy. The older a person is, the better his chances are, that even if he never learned musical methods, they can learn it easily. For a youth who is still unbalanced in life, this is harder to archive.

“Think about it; a child is easily disciplined through punishment, and an elderly person also learned through life to lead a balanced life. This is only natural. The most likely period of qi deviation is when a person is an adult but not yet old – this is because that is the part of life when a person’s emotions are the hardest to control. However, to archive high cultivation, one needs to manipulate their qi expertly. Those who have high cultivation are more likely to have steady flow of qi, so musical cultivation is no issue.”

“Are you hinting at something?” Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“Even if I was, you wouldn’t want to learn. And also your cultivation is completely different. You use Huangfeng to express quick, violent bursts of spiritual energy. This is the exact opposite way of cultivating than what is required for musical cultivation.”

“But you think I could? If I wanted to?” Jin Ling asked, looking at him from the corner of his eyes. Lan SiZhui thought about it for a moment.

“Generally speaking, everyone who has spiritual energy circulating in their body could learn. To learn this strict control and discipline... Maybe.”

“SiZhui, I’ve asked you. Is ‘maybe’ the best you can come up with?”

Lan SiZhui chuckled softly. “Sorry. It really is the best I can tell you.”

“Shameless!” Jin Ling exclaimed, though his voice was more amused than offended, so Lan SiZhui let himself laugh a little.

“The truth is, for people like Wei WuXian, high-cultivation comes naturally. This is no offense towards you, just a fact. Say... For some people, finding a balance of something comes naturally, while others are clumsy and trip over their own feet. It isn’t anyone’s fault, it’s just that we are born with different talents. Ah... JingYi always struggled with this, actually. He is a good cultivator, but not the best, he generally doesn’t have a natural talent for anything in particular – I’m not saying this to insult him, it’s just a fact. These people, like JingYi, they will have to put in a lot of effort to get as good at something as someone like Wei WuXian can do without even thinking about it.”

“That’s unfair.” Jin Ling furrowed his brows. “To have people struggle so much in life while other can just get it without trying...”

“Isn’t this the same argument Su She had?” Lan SiZhui asked with raised eyebrows. At this, Jin Ling’s eyes widened and he glared at Lan SiZhui.

“You—!” He began, but before he could begin to argue, Lan SiZhui held up a hand.

“Don’t worry. There’s actually nothing wrong with this mindset. It’s just that once a person begins to view the world only through this, they become bitter and like Su She.”

“And anyways, he had a high cultivation. What was he complaining about?” Jin Ling scoffed, looking away.

“You’re right.” Lan SiZhui hummed, then said: “I don’t like to make this comparison, but think about it this way. Wen ZhuLiu had a low cultivation, but he eventually put in so much effort and also had the support of Sect Leader Wen, that eventually his cultivation level didn’t matter because he learned a unique cultivation method that would later put him above his peers, and despite his hard beginning in life, he turned out not to be a bitter person. Lan JingYi also doesn’t mind having no real talent in anything, because he knows this is how the world works and he puts in enough effort that if I wasn’t around, he would probably be the head disciple. People like Su She, they just see the unfairness of this situation and can’t

accept it, turning into bitter people who want this to change. However, how could you change how the world works?”

“Mn.” Jin Ling hummed thoughtfully.

They didn’t speak much more about this topic, however, Lan SiZhui was glad. Even though they had their differences still, it seemed like their strained relationship from when they fought in the Nightless City began to mend a little, going as far as having a great conversation with each other. He smiled as Jin Ling ate his food then stood to dust himself off and declare they should get back.



At the end of the week, they took a day off to just relax. Lan SiZhui spent the day in the Cold Springs, while Jin Ling slept in, having looking forward to this all day the previous day when they agreed to take a day for themselves. They didn’t even eat together, enjoying their own company for a change.

The next day, they returned, Lan SiZhui having finished with history, moved on to the Qin language studies. While history offered a good foundation to this knowledge, herein laid the true information he needed to understand *Spring Again*.

The theory behind Qin language was simple. In ancient times, people believed that music had an effect on souls. Be it a soul of a living person or someone who had already passed away, people played for the sake of this. They played for the sick to get better, played for the dead to rest peacefully. This was later studied by one of the ancestors of the Lan Sect more thoroughly, which studies found that music, indeed, had an effect on souls.

The Lan who studied this found that some of the notes would result in anger in most people, while others would soothe them or even relieved them from pain. Some notes even caused the pain. The people who collected this information collected these notes into different categories, based on what effect they had on a person. A category was created for those that soothed the soul, one for the notes that angered them, one for those that proved to get rid of lingering souls and so on. These collections were named after what effects it had, such as *Cleansing*, *Eradication* and so on. This was the first stage.

This study took decades, maybe even centuries, the books didn’t specify.

Later on, these categories were further defined, and so compositions such as ‘*Clarity*’, ‘*Purify*’ and others had been created. By this time, spiritual energy was also introduced to this method, and the Lan Sect began to use these collections and compositions to help with their cultivation and night hunting. This was the second stage.

The third stage came after this, when an unspecified amount of time later. When the first stage was done, they haven’t yet played the songs with spiritual energy, therefore when the individual notes were studied, this went undiscovered. However, after the second stage was finished, and the disciples used these songs with spiritual energy, they discovered that individual notes caused different reactions. This was the first time the collection *Inquiry* was introduced. At this time, *Inquiry* was used only to cause specific reactions in souls.

*Inquiry* as the Lan used it currently was defined after it was used in a very specific way once and they discovered that if playing with intent, these notes also prompted the spirit to respond. This took a long time, because at first, the disciples tried this method on live people and it didn't work. Then, they figured out that this worked only for those souls who were not tethered to their physical forms anymore, be it a barely alive person or a dead one. This was the fourth stage, the moment when *Inquiry* was defined into specific individual phrases and words, later collected into compositions such as '*Summoning*' and '*Release*' and others. From the fourth stage did they begin to refer to this musical cultivation method as a language.

Because of the complexity of this method, it was mostly the Lan Sect who used it. Musical cultivation as Jin Ling referred earlier, was not unique to the Lan Sect. The theory that music had an effect on spirits had been around for centuries before the Lan Sect began to refine it. It was only because they were the ones to define the specific collections that this became the Lan Sect's unique cultivation method. While other Sects and Clans also used musical cultivation, they were never as effective with it as those who studied the Lan Sect's collections.

Learning about all this, Lan SiZhui began to realize something. By the end of the second week, during which he only studied the Qin language's creation and early records of it, some original texts from the studies remaining, Lan SiZhui thought he had a good idea how *Collection of Time* worked.

Unlike what he theorized before, the phrases interwoven into the song were not actually individual phrases like he first thought. When he studied the *Song of Winter* before, he was sure it was the early version of *Inquiry*, however, this was incorrect.

Jumping up, he hurried over to the table that held *Collection of Time* and its corresponding tomes. Jin Ling looked up, alarmed, but Lan SiZhui ignored him as he looked for that book he found long ago when he and the others researched in the Forbidden Room. That one book that mentioned *Song of Winter*. Which one was it? Lan SiZhui had a pretty good memory, but that night he studied countless books and it was dark...

"SiZhui?" Jin Ling prompted when Lan SiZhui slumped down in front of the table.

"I remembered something." Lan SiZhui told him. "Something we found during the first time we studied *Spring Again*. But I don't remember which book it was in."

"Look through them all then." Jin Ling frowned at him. Lan SiZhui sighed.

"Yes. I'll have to." He answered, pressing his lips together. Jin Ling snorted.

"For someone who admittedly does a lot of research, you complain about it more than I do, and I don't even like doing it. This is the, what, fifth time you said you didn't want to do this since we started?"

"I didn't say I don't want to do it." Lan SiZhui said, frustrated. "But I'm allowed to get bored and fed up with things as well, am I not?"

“Sure. You just usually don’t.” Jin Ling frowned at him. “Are you sure we cannot convince Lan XiChen to let you into the Cold Pond Cave?” Lan SiZhui sighed.

“I’m fine.” He said dismissively. He visited the Cold Spring a couple of times now, although he never went to a healer to check up on his progress of lingering resentful energy, he believed the positive spiritual energy of the springs worked. He discarded this thought and topic, not wanting to talk about it. Back then, when him and Wen Qing talked in the village near Nightless City, he told her that he will address this issue once the question of the Wen remnants was settled, so she better be around to treat him. Since she wasn’t, he wasn’t too willing to think about this issue.

He settled properly in front of the table, pulling the first book in front of himself to read through. “Just... Eager to get going, I guess.” He mumbled.

“Sure.” Jin Ling drawled, sounding like he didn’t believe this at all. He kept watching Lan SiZhui for a while, then eventually returned to his own texts.

Naturally, the book Lan SiZhui was looking for was one of the last ones he looked through. However, he did find it, another week had gone by. There! This book, it talked a little about the *Collection of Time*. It didn’t even mention the title, but Lan SiZhui recognized some notes that were included to offer examples as the book described a new collection that had been put together. This book analyzed the *Collection*, in a rather poetic way. Lan SiZhui didn’t know exactly why it was written. It sounded like an outsider came to Cloud Recesses, had been performed the *Collection of Time* and they wrote a report about it, to advertise how good the Lan Sect’s new cultivation method was.

The book described each song in a flowery language, not providing titles for the different songs, only referring to them as ‘this next one’. The author described the songs, how a note or another was delicately fabricated. They also provided some examples for these claims, although not the entire scores, just some clever transitions they thought worthy of mention. The first time around, this was how Lan SiZhui recognized what song this author was talking about, since right before this, he read *Collection of Time* and seeing some of the notes, he recognized it immediately.

The book by the end spoke about one particular song that was ‘*precious and exquisite*’ for it was the ‘*first attempt at recording something different the Lan Sect is working on, rumored to be a new cultivation method that could change the cultivation world as we know it*’.

This was why Lan SiZhui assumed this was the early recording of *Inquiry* and assumed that *Inquiry* was always known to have specific phrases and responses. The textbooks the disciples learned the Qin language from never detailed its discovery as well as the books Lan XiChen brought out from the Forbidden Room. Lan SiZhui was taught as follows:

A long time ago music was believed to have effect on souls. Later on this was confirmed and studied by the Lan Sect. Every musical note had a different effect on souls. These notes were collected into different compositions, such as *Cleansing* and *Inquiry*, and in those, compositions such as ‘*Clarity*’ and ‘*Summoning*’. Upon further study, the Lan Sect discovered that individual notes had individual responses. Thus, it was recorded into specific

phrases and words, defining a musical language. *Inquiry* was the defining factor in Qin language.

However, this was incorrect, as Lan SiZhui just learned from the books that came from the Forbidden Room. Well, not incorrect, but incredibly simplified and condensed. The four stages were never mentioned in modern studies. However, knowing that there had been four stages, possibly centuries between the discovery of each stage, this changed everything.

Technically, the difference between how Lan SiZhui was taught and how it actually was didn't matter much in the grand scheme. However, when Lan SiZhui first studied *Spring Again* and *Song of Winter*, he assumed they were early versions of *Inquiry*, incorrect but done with purpose. However, if *The Collection of Time* was created between the third stage and fourth stage of creating Qin language, that meant that *Inquiry* was not yet discovered when these songs were written.

The importance of this laid in intent and accuracy. These songs were not accurate at all. The intent was woven into the songs, not the accurate phrases. Lan SiZhui's hands shook as he picked up the *Collection of Time*.

"SiZhui, you've gone pale." Jin Ling said from a table over. Lan SiZhui looked up, his lips parted in excitement.

"I... I... I've figured it out."

At this, Jin Ling sat up straighter, concentrating on Lan SiZhui. "What?"

"Not the..." Lan SiZhui shook his head. "Not the way back yet. But I know how *Spring Again* works. I figured it out. What I thought was wrong. It's..."

"SiZhui, you're rambling."

"I feel..." Lan SiZhui took a deep breath, feeling lightheaded.

"Hey, call for a healer!" Jin Ling barked at their guards. Lan SiZhui waved them off as one of them turned to hurry off.

"No need. Really. I'm alright." Lan SiZhui closed his eyes and took deep breaths, calming his erratic heartbeat. "I'm fine. I'm alright."

"Okay." Jin Ling said slowly, carefully. "What happened? What have you figured out?"

"When I first studied *Spring Again*, I thought it was a specific spell that brought us here. But I was wrong. '*Summoning*' is not in this song at all."

"Lan JingYi recognized it too though, did he not?" Jin Ling asked, seemingly remembering that time as well.

"He did. Back then, I found it strange as well. I also thought I recognized '*Summoning*', but it didn't sound accurate. However, this song was not created using Qin language. Back then, Qin language wasn't even a thing. This was the time when the Lan Sect was still studying the

individual notes, of what effects it had on spirits. I don't know if this makes sense to you. *Inquiry* is important because it defines certain phrases to communicate with spirits. However, before they knew they could communicate with spirits, this was not what it was used for. Each note in *Inquiry* has a specific effect and reaction brought out from the ghost you try to communicate with. This is why it is a language. It isn't... Qin language is not the same as our language. It doesn't have words. It has effects on spirits and based on this effect, the way they react, the cultivator assigns a certain meaning to certain notes and based on this, they can get very specific answers."

"You're right, this doesn't make sense." Jin Ling frowned. Lan SiZhui sighed and went over to the guqin. He gestured Jin Ling over as well, who sat across him.

"Say, I want to know a spirit's name."

"Okay." Jin Ling nodded.

"I'll play the notes to inquire." He played them from muscle memory, not really thinking about it, since he wasn't playing with spiritual energy. "Then I'll wait for the response. Say, it is you. The answer would be this." He plucked some of the strings. "But it could also be this." He plucked another set. "Or this." He played again.

"Why multiple answers?" Jin Ling asked with a frown.

"Because each of these answers mean your name. Hm. Alright, I'll try to explain. Qin notations are written to describe what tune it is in, finger position and stroke technique. It uses several characters from our written language." He showed Jin Ling the notation for *Spring Again*. Jin Ling nodded.

"It looks like a bunch of nonsense."

"Yes, it would to those who don't practice it. To me, this is like someone standing behind me at all times and telling me how to play. I know the motions, they just need to tell me when to do what. This is how qin notations are."

"That's cheating." Jin Ling huffed. "When I had to learn how to play a musical instrument, I had to remember these things."

"Qin are a bit more complicated than those instruments other Sects encourage. This is why it's almost exclusive to the Lan Sect. Anyways. Based on what strings are plucked, what order, what finger position and technique is required to play a particular note, it can be determined what phrase the ghost is trying to relay. As you know, the more fluent one is in Qin language, the more accurate *Inquiry* is."

"That, I know." Jin Ling nodded.

"Right. So, a lot of this is guessing what the ghost means. This isn't a preset table of this sound means this character or word. A lot of it is up to the player's interpretation."



“But then...” Jin Ling trailed off. “So, my name can be said in multiple ways.” He paused and Lan SiZhui nodded, encouraging him to continue the line of thought. “I’m guessing some of these ways could mean different things as well?”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded, glad that Jin Ling understood.

“Then how do you know what’s the correct answer?”

“This is where expertise and fluency in Qin language comes into play. Listen carefully.” Lan SiZhui said, then played all three ways Jin Ling’s name can be said with long pauses between them.

“To be honest, SiZhui, they sound the same to me.” Jin Ling said, confused.

“Not exactly. Pay attention very closely. Your name is most accurate with this.” He said, plucking the first set. “This one,” he played the second, “is more likely to be part of a phrase. This one,” he played the third, “is usually played in a different context. Since I’m fluent in Qin language, I can correctly interpret it. If one is less fluent in Qin language, upon hearing the second phrase, they might interpret your name as Ding Bing. Upon hearing the second, they might interpret it as Jin RuoJian.”

“But then if a ghost lies to you...” Jin Ling frowned, then shook his head. “Wait, they say the more fluent one is in Qin language, the less likely is that the ghost will lie to them. How’s that, when there’s multiple phrases the ghost can answer as?”

“As I said, these are very similar, but they’re a bit different. Since I’m fluent in Qin language, I am able to tell that the second phrase couldn’t be it, since it is more likely to be part of a phrase, and the third one cannot be it, because the context is wrong. So, when the ghost plays any of these three, I’ll still understand that they meant the first phrase, therefore, I can evade their lies. It is similar with longer phrases as well. Also, my spiritual power binds them, compels them to answer as honest as they can. Ghosts generally don’t lie. It is the interpretation of the cultivator who might get it wrong and the lies told being interpreted as what they are, not the true meaning of the phrase.”

“Okay.” Jin Ling nodded. “I think I understand this now. So, why is this such a big revelation?”

“I’ve learned that Qin language and *Inquiry* were created simultaneously. If this was the case, *Spring Again* would’ve been written using the Qin language, this is what I’ve assumed. That this was an early version of the Qin language, inaccurate, but Qin language nonetheless. However, if this was not the case, then Qin language doesn’t even matter, in relation to *Spring Again*, *Inquiry* does.”

“Didn’t you just say *Inquiry* was Qin language?” Jin Ling asked, massaging his temples.

“No. Qin language was created based on the reactions to *Inquiry*. It is a small detail, but in our case, an important one. Before Qin language was created, *Inquiry* was used to bring out specific reactions from spirits.”

“This sounds like you’re saying *Inquiry* is Qin language. I don’t understand.” Lan SiZhui made a frustrated noise, irritated with himself for being unable to explain properly.

“Imagine a child. They don’t know all the words to use to tell you something but from their vague rambling, you can guess what they want. In this metaphor, *Inquiry* is the child’s speech. Before Qin language was refined, people could vaguely understand what effect individual notes had on spirits. After Qin language was created, they understood more clearly.”

“The child grew up and began talking properly.” Jin Ling nodded. “Okay, I get it now. Again, why is this important?”

“Since back then, *Inquiry* was not as accurate as it is now, most of these songs were written with intention, not accuracy. This means that what we’re looking for isn’t specific phrases from *Inquiry*. We’re instead looking for the vague intention of the song. I need to study *Spring Again* more with this knowledge, but I suspect like this, I can recognize the intention in the notes, and based on this, either find the counter spell in *Collection of Time* or make up my own song to bring us back.”

“So... So, this was important... for you to understand and know what exactly you are looking for?” Jin Ling asked haltingly, working it out in his head as he spoke.

“Exactly.” Lan SiZhui nodded enthusiastically. “If there is a counter spell in the *Collection*, I’ll be able to find it like this. If there isn’t... Well, I’ll have to make up a song. It might take me a bit of try and error. I’m not sure how to make up something solely based on impressions. My usage of Qin language to control resentful energy combines the two as I saw in *Spring Again*, or thought I saw it back then.”

“So, wait, you’re not even using the old Qin language to control resentful energy, just something like it?” Jin Ling frowned at him. Lan SiZhui shrugged as much as his sore back let him.

“Technically, I think I invented Qin language again, based on the history of the creation of the language. The Lan ancestors created the language similarly. It just took them a longer period of time and they discovered these things in controlled environments.”

“Huh.” Jin Ling huffed. “Alright, so now that you know how, I don’t need to keep reading those manuals, right?”

“Right.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Then, what am I to do while you figure this out?” Jin Ling frowned. Lan SiZhui also thought about this. In the end, his gaze caught on Jin Ling’s hand – he was sitting with his legs folded under himself, one of his hands on his knee as is proper. However, the other was on his hip – on his qiankun pouch.

“Do you know why Jin ZiXuan was able to use your spiritual weapon?”

“Hm?” Jin Ling asked, confused about the topic change. “Probably because of our blood relation.” He shrugged. “Why?”

“I find it strange. In the past, Jiang Cheng also tried to use it as well, and he was unsuccessful.”

“To be fair, I first used Huangfeng in a battle situation as well. You remember? We were in the Burial Mounds, looking for the Yin Iron. We lost each other briefly. I had to fight off some fierce corpses and as I shot with my bow in desperation, I actually managed to use some spiritual power as well. At the time, I thought it was a fluke, but after, when we were fighting in the Lotus Pier, I managed to use it again. Maybe Uncle couldn’t use it because he was not in a battle situation.”

“Maybe.” Lan SiZhui hummed thoughtfully. “Still, your studies of the Lan’s musical cultivation might not have been in vain after all. Huangfeng uses guqin string to channel spiritual energy. While I figure out our way back, why don’t you study this?”

“Study how to use Huangfeng?” Jin Ling frowned at him and Lan SiZhui nodded.

“A bow is not very distinct like a sword is. If you ever get into a situation where you lose it, you should know how to recreate it. Just in case.” Lan SiZhui advised. Jin Ling seemed to think about it, then in the end, he nodded.

“Alright. Although if you think this bow can be recreated, you’re wrong.”

“It’s a simple Jin issued bow you received from one of the Jin disciples you came to Cloud Recesses with.” Lan SiZhui hedged. “It really isn’t very distinctive. Wouldn’t it be better to have one made that stands out, once you’re at home?” Jin Ling pursed his lips, looking at him for a long moment. Lan SiZhui felt uncomfortable. “And what if the string breaks? You’ll need to learn how it works, so you can replace it.”

“SiZhui, for a simple disciple, you have a thick face advising me in this.” Jin Ling said after a while, with the air of his Sect Leader Jin grandfather. Lan SiZhui made a face at this and Jin Ling huffed. “Alright. You’re right.”

Lan SiZhui let out a breath. “I’ll ask ZeWu-Jun to have some tomes assigned to you that you can study.”

“Great.” Jin Ling said, clearly finding this not ‘great’ at all. Lan SiZhui repressed a smile.



Lan XiChen agreed to Jin Ling studying the nature of spiritual weapons and also spiritual guqin. Since these tomes were available for everyone in the library’s common sections, he didn’t have to be confined with Lan SiZhui in the western wing and he could even take the books outside. Jin Ling seemed reluctant to part from Lan SiZhui in the beginning, but then he wanted to practice what he learned, so soon he migrated to another place, a classroom near the practice fields. The weaponry master of Cloud Recesses saw this, and decided to help Jin Ling learn about this topic and so soon he began to take private lessons from this person.

Naturally, everyone was impressed by the nature of Jin Ling's spiritual weapon. Nobody ever heard of spiritual bows and the weaponry master was knowledgeable, so he eagerly took Jin Ling as his student, so together they could study the bow.

Lan SiZhui was glad for his friend's process in this and felt no ill feelings towards him about leaving him alone. Studying the *Collection* and other texts from this same period was a lonely job anyways.

He was like this, in the library, studying the songs included in the *Collection of Time*, trying to understand each song's purpose when there was a commotion outside. Lan SiZhui looked up from the guqin, glancing towards the doorway where his guard stood and also glanced towards the entrance. For a moment they just listened, then a senior disciple came inside. He bowed to the guard and told him something quietly. The guard then glanced at Lan SiZhui and nodded.

“Is everything alright?” Lan SiZhui asked as the senior disciple left. The guard nodded, assuming his position.

"Everything is alright, ChunYu-Jun. Young Master Wei arrived."

“Wei WuXian?” Lan SiZhui frowned. “Doesn’t he still have punishment?”

“I wouldn’t know.” The guard shrugged. “A-Xin just informed me because Sect Leader Lan wanted me to know not to be surprised if he shows up.”

"I see." Lan SiZhui hummed. For a bit, he just sat there, pondering on this. Wei WuXian was sentenced to six months of seclusion. Four, five at most had gone by only. What was he doing here? Did something happen? Or was he just here to get away from Lotus Pier? Surely, this would not go down easy with the Madam Yu. There had to be a good reason for his visit. Could it be that he wanted the other half of Stygian Tiger Amulet? After all, he expressed he regretted not destroying it after the Sunshot Campaign.

He expected the other to show up soon, however, this never happened. A little disappointed, he returned to his studies.



That night, ZeWu-Jun summoned him to his rooms. Lan SiZhui expected this conversation to be about Wei WuXian's visit, so he went eagerly, wanting to know what the other was doing in Cloud Recesses. Despite his studies having occupied his thought for the better part of the day, his thoughts kept returning to this topic and he got more and more puzzled. Wei WuXian's presence here simply didn't make sense.

Upon entering, he found Jin Ling already inside and waiting for him with Lan XiChen. Lan SiZhui greeted them and sat next to Jin Ling at Lan XiChen's prompting.

“I’ve just asked Jin Ling how his studies were going.” Lan XiChen said, once they exchanged courtesies. Jin Ling shifted uncomfortably.

“Fine.” Jin Ling answered stiffly. “I have to meditate a lot.” He said with an all-suffering expression. Lan XiChen smiled at this amused, but didn’t say anything.

“Does this help with understanding Huangfeng?” Lan SiZhui asked, when the Sect Leader didn’t take the word, he figured they were free to talk.

“Well, sort of.” Jin Ling said. “The weaponry master, Wu Jing believes that I have to practice musical cultivation in order to understand guqin.” He rolled his eyes. “So, I have to meditate and also learn the guqin.”

“It is required to establish a steady flow of qi and tight control over your spiritual energy.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“I know.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “My teacher told me. I just hate it.”

“Anyhow, your teacher reports that at least, you understand the theory behind this, so that, you don’t have to learn.” Lan XiChen said good naturedly.

“Well, yes, since I had to research it for weeks.” Jin Ling huffed.

“Mn.” Lan XiChen repressed a smile, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “How is the research going for you, SiZhui? Any development since we spoke last?”

“I’ve studied some of the songs. There are still a couple to go over, but I believe I understand it better now, how they were crafted.”

“That’s good. Hopefully then you’ll have an answer soon.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded. He hesitated, then decided to ask: “ZeWu-Jun, I’ve heard Wei WuXian had come to visit.”

“What?!” Jin Ling swirled on him, then turned towards Lan XiChen with wide eyes. “Is that true?! What is he doing here?! Doesn’t he have punishment?! Madam Yu is going to kill him, if she finds out he sneaked out!”

“He didn’t sneak out.” Lan XiChen placated. “In fact, he’s here on Madam Yu’s orders.”

“What?!” Jin Ling glared at him wide eyed. Lan XiChen sighed.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui chided him softly. “Let him finish.” At this, Jin Ling crossed his arms across his chest, but remained silent. Lan XiChen inclined his head in gratitude.

“During the wedding celebrations, me and the Jiang Sect heads began to converse. Previously, Young Master Wei approached me, worried about you all. Ah, this was after the assassination attempt, and by then, most of the commotion had died down. I’ve told him he shouldn’t worry, for this time around, I’d have more certain grounds to claim you instead of the Jin Sect, since you escaped from Koi Tower. He said if this happens, he’d like to come and see for himself if you were truly alright. That was when the Jiang Sect heads approached. Madam Yu was disapproving at first, however, Sect Leader Jiang convinced her.

“Apparently, at Lotus Pier, despite being in seclusion, Wei WuXian was often visited by his disciple mates, including Jiang WanYin and Jiang YanLi. Even Nie HuaiSang and Nie MingJue visited him, rumors have it. Since this was the case, his seclusion was only that by name. Jiang FengMian convinced Madam Yu that Young Master Wei would have a more strict seclusion in the Cloud Recesses. Madam Yu eventually saw his point and agreed to this.

“We have been exchanging correspondence about this with Sect Leader Jiang for the past few weeks, and we finally settled on this.”

“Why now, when we’re just about to leave though?” Jin Ling scoffed. “If he messes this up...”

“Don’t worry.” Lan XiChen placated. “This was by design. Since Young Master Wei wanted to make sure you were all alright, I suspected that it would be best if he came before you left. However, he’s still here to spend the rest of his punishment. He won’t cause problems.”

“You say that now!” Jin Ling said. “You don’t know him. He has the tendency to turn up at the worst times. Appearing amidst chaos, or creating it, it doesn’t matter as long as there’s chaos around.” At this, Lan XiChen just shrugged helplessly. “Where is he now then?” Jin Ling asked.

“He was granted permission to visit WangJi and JingYi for now. His seclusion will start at curfew.”

“Good.” Jin Ling frowned. “I don’t even want to see him.” Lan XiChen just smiled at him.

“SiZhui, please let me know as soon as you come to a conclusion. I’ll have to make arrangements, regarding JingYi and the Mingshi.”

“Yes, ZeWu-Jun.” Lan SiZhui nodded, understanding the dismissal. He stood with Jin Ling and Lan XiChen, then the two of them bowed to the Sect Leader before leaving for the night. Curfew was still an hour or two away.

“This guy is absolutely shameless!” Jin Ling complained as they headed towards the dining hall to get their dinner before returning to their rooms for the night. “Coming here like he has the right!”

“Madam Yu allowed it.” Lan SiZhui reasoned.

“Madam Yu was probably bullied into it.” Jin Ling countered. “Think about it. Wei WuXian began to truly act out after he attended lectures here. Sure, the Sunshot Campaign had to do with it, but still. Then, it was ChunYu-Jun who first used demonic cultivation, who was from the Lan Sect. Madam Yu didn’t like you to begin with because she thought you were a Wen, so that’s even worse. But in Madam Yu’s perspective, don’t you think any interaction Wei WuXian has with the Lan Sect only leads to catastrophes and chaos?”

Put it like that, Jin Ling wasn’t wrong per se... “And how was she bullied into accepting then?”

“Just imagine. Wei WuXian says he wants to come to Cloud Recesses. Madam Yu and Jiang FengMian overhear him and Madam Yu immediately shuts the idea down – she doesn’t like the Lan Sect, doesn’t want to associate with them, especially when it comes to Wei WuXian. However, Jiang FengMian is soft and knows Wei WuXian doesn’t hold himself to seclusion like he should. Maybe Madam Yu even knows this; Jiang FengMian surely does. To prevent Madam Yu’s ire at this insolence, he is desperate to have Wei WuXian removed to uphold peace in the house, so sending him to Cloud Recesses just makes sense. Maybe he even says so to Madam Yu. Maybe he just reasons that the Lan Sect is harsh and strict in their punishments, so sending Wei WuXian here would be bad for Wei WuXian. Madam Yu doesn’t want to make a scene of this, so she agrees, in order to keep the peace of the house.”

“That doesn’t sound like bullying. By this, it sounds reasonable. Besides, would Madam Yu truly be afraid of causing a scene?” Lan SiZhui asked with a frown.

“Alright, sure. Maybe Madam Yu isn’t like that, but what about Jiang FengMian? Think about it. Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan just married; naturally, like this, Madam Yu can finally stop worrying about this. However, this means she can turn her attention fully on punishing Wei WuXian. Knowing this, would Master Jiang want him around his wife?”

“So clever?” Lan SiZhui wondered. “But then, how did he convince Madam Yu?”

“Emotional manipulation, SiZhui, learn this phrase.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes as they arrived at the dining hall.

“Huh? Why would SiZhui need to learn this phrase, MouShi?” Asked a familiar voice from ahead. Looking up, they saw Wei WuXian standing in front of the dining hall, watching them in amusement.

“You—!” Jin Ling exclaimed, pointing at him. “What do you think you’re doing, huh?!”

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui hushed him, seeing many people turn towards them, wanting to see what the commotion was about. Jin Ling didn’t show he heard, but he wasn’t as loud now either.

“Coming here to check on us, who are you, huh?” Jin Ling scoffed at Wei WuXian.

“I’m your uncle!” Wei WuXian laughed. “Ah, Jin Ling! You see me for the first time in who knows how long, and this is all you can say to me?” Wei WuXian pouted with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Brother Wei, welcome back to Cloud Recesses.” Lan SiZhui greeted him with a smile. Next to him, Jin Ling huffed, annoyed.

“SiZhui!” Wei WuXian beamed at him. “It’s good to see you again!”

“Can you be any louder?! People are trying to have a quiet meal behind you.” Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui sighed, not pointing out Jin Ling was being even louder.

“Why don’t we take our meals to our rooms and there, we can talk normally?” Lan SiZhui asked, then glanced back at his guard. “If that’s alright?”

“Young Master Wei’s punishment begins at curfew.” The guard said. “Until then, he’s free to do as he likes.”

“Ah, you guys, why do you have these brothers following you?” Wei WuXian asked with a frown as they stacked food on their trays.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Jin Ling asked, annoyed. “We’re dangerous criminals, didn’t you know?”

“Ah, but... I thought ZeWu-Jun was being nice to you?!”

“Who’s being nice to us?!” Jin Ling scoffed.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui reprimanded, because even though ZeWu-Jun had guards following them, other than this, he truly didn’t treat them any different.

“Alright, fine. But he’s still Sect Leader, what is he supposed to do?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “He has to assign us guards, or else people will get suspicious.” He said as they headed towards the disciple quarters. Wei WuXian was looking around curiously, he must’ve never been in this part of Cloud Recesses. Jin Ling let himself into Lan SiZhui’s rooms comfortably and put his tray down before going over to light a lantern for them, even though the sky was still light out.

“Ah, SiZhui, you still have the same...” He began, then changed his sentence: “Ah, you have nice quarters!” Wei WuXian commented as they all settled by the table. “It is very clean.” He said, glancing around.

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui said.

“Ah, but where is your sword and guqin?” At this, Jin Ling and Lan SiZhui exchanged a look.

“They’re not here.” Lan SiZhui said, then picked up his bowl. “Let us eat.” He said, then began eating. Jin Ling huffed and did so as well. Wei WuXian watched them for a moment, then began eating as well, making a face at the bland taste. It was true, Lan SiZhui haven’t seen his weapons in a while. His guqin must still be with Lan XiChen and his sword with the Jin Sect. He wondered if he will get back either of them before they leave. It was true that his personal belongings traveled with them through time, but who was to say it would happen again? He would need to ask Lan XiChen about this.

Once they were finished, Lan SiZhui prepared them tea while Jin Ling went over and brought some almonds from the shelf where Lan SiZhui kept them. Once they had tea and settled properly, Jin Ling turned to Wei WuXian.

“So, why did you want to come here?” He asked, chewing on some almonds while drinking his tea.



“Didn’t ZeWu-Jun tell you that?” Wei WuXian asked distracted, as he watched Lan SiZhui also picking up some almonds. At his look, Lan SiZhui offered the bowl to him and Wei WuXian picked some up, examining them before popping one into his mouth. “Ah, you guys, is this how you usually spend your evenings?” He asked, gesturing at the table. Lan SiZhui looked over it confused. They’ve moved the empty trays near the door to be passed to the servants later and now only the teas and almond bowl remained.

“Is there something wrong?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“What?” Jin Ling scoffed at Wei WuXian. “This is Cloud Recesses, not Lotus Pier. We don’t drink wine and stay up until the sun comes up.”

“Ah?” Wei WuXian peered at him curiously. “Is that what you do when you visit Lotus Pier?”

“What?” Jin Ling scowled. “Isn’t that what your idea of a fun evening is?”

“You wouldn’t know what my idea is of a fun evening.” Wei WuXian waved him off.

“We drank enough together during the Sunshot Campaign to get an idea of it though.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Wei WuXian’s eyes, however, widened. Jin Ling frowned at him. “What? Don’t tell me you don’t remember that either. I thought your memory issues from Madam Yu’s attack had gone away by now.”

“Ah, mostly.” Wei WuXian shrugged. “Some things I still don’t remember clearly. Don’t worry though, it will all come back eventually.” He grinned. “Or you’ll just have to remind me.”

“Who wants to remind you?!” Jin Ling shuddered. “I don’t even want to remember. To think you and Jiang Cheng convinced me to drink that one time...”

“Ah, we really did?!” Wei WuXian laughed, delighted. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“Anyways.” He said a touch louder than necessary. “ZeWu-Jun told us you wanted to see for yourself if we were alright. You could’ve just sent a letter, you know. There was no need to come personally.” Jin Ling scoffed at him.

“I couldn’t really send letters. I mean, sure, Jiang Cheng sent them instead of me, but to send a letter to Nie HuaiSang, I even had to beg him and kowtow.”

“It’s because you’re annoying.” Jin Ling huffed.

“So mean.” Wei WuXian pouted. “Here, I was worried about you, and all you can say is that I’m annoying.”

“Well, you are. Don’t be so hung up on this, I tell you this since the start.” Jin Ling huffed.

“Ah, Jin Ling, did you know? Sect Leader Lan said you were studying musical cultivation and spiritual tools. Why is that? Is it because of your spiritual tool?”

“It’s none of your business.” Jin Ling told him. “Just go back to seclusion already and leave us alone. How many times do I have to tell you this?”

“So hostile.” Wei WuXian pouted. “Ah, but instead of this, tell me, what have the Jin done to you to have escaped from Koi Tower like this? When I saw you outside the reception hall, I was really surprised. I thought I’d have to sneak out myself that night and break you out myself!”

“Wei WuXian.” Jin Ling said evenly, not looking at the other. “I told you countless times before. Stay out of our business.”

“You’re so insistent on it.” Wei WuXian frowned at him. “What are you trying to hide?”

“I’m trying to hide the fact that this is none of your business. Seriously. Ever since we met, all you do is poke your nose into it. Wasn’t this why you got punished in the first place? You just couldn’t stay out of it.”

“Hey! Lan Zhan told me—Well, so, you were the one who asked us to go to the Burial Mounds and deliver that message, so why are you like this? It’s not like I poked my nose into this on purpose.”

“I asked you to deliver a short message, yet days later you were still there.” Jin Ling scoffed at him. “If you didn’t stay, we wouldn’t have to rescue you when Madam Yu stabbed you, and you wouldn’t have to have received such harsh punishment.”

“Ah, that’s right.” Lan SiZhui turned to him. “Brother Wei, ZeWu-Jun was unable to tell me what punishment you received.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Wei WuXian waved him off. “It wasn’t even that harsh, I don’t know what Jin Ling is talking about.”

“Oh? Didn’t you receive a whipping with Zidian as well as strikes with the board, besides the six months of seclusion?” Jin Ling cocked an eyebrow. Wei WuXian frowned at him.

“How do you even know that?”

“The Jin disciples love to gossip.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“You didn’t tell me.” Lan SiZhui frowned at his friend as well. Jin Ling huffed.

“You already feel like you’re responsible for everything. Did you really need to know?” Lan SiZhui was quiet at this.

“Ah, SiZhui, don’t feel bad. This was my decision to stand by you, so I don’t regret it.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui sighed. He wished people would just stop telling him this.

“What about you guys?” Wei WuXian asked. “What was your punishments?” At this, Jin Ling was quiet, glancing over at Lan SiZhui. Then, he said:

“It doesn’t matter anymore, does it? We’re already over it.”

“Ah, but it matters! Jin Ling, tell me.” Wei WuXian asked seriously. Jin Ling huffed at him.

“No.” He said, then turned back to his tea. “Don’t be such a nosy person. Nobody likes that.”

“Seriously you guys.” Wei WuXian rolled his eyes. “Whenever you ask me something, I must answer, yet when I ask you something, it’s none of my business. Is this fair?”

“Nobody cares if it’s fair or not.” Jin Ling told him. “It is simply none of your business. The sooner you realize this, the sooner you stop asking us questions.”

Wei WuXian sighed. Lan SiZhui let them talk like this for a few moments, then he asked:

“Brother Wei, thanks for being concerned about us, but Jin Ling isn’t speaking without reason. Are you sure coming here was a good idea?”

At this, Wei WuXian shrugged. “SiZhui, I was truly worried about you. When we returned to Lotus Pier and I was punished, Jiang Cheng said you have people to look out for you, but I didn’t really believe this. I sent a message to Nie HuaiSang to ask if he can do anything for you. In response he came to Lotus Pier to talk. He told me it was actually Nie MingJue who was close to you all, so I asked HuaiSang to deliver a message to him instead. Who knew, in response, even he came to the Lotus Pier! Madam Yu was so mad at this, I thought she was going to whip me again. Anyways. After speaking with Nie MingJue, he said something that concerned me. Later, when talking to Sect Leader Lan, he also confirmed... Something about you all leaving?” He looked at them both questioningly.

Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. This was strange. Why would Nie MingJue, then later, Lan XiChen tell Wei WuXian they were going to leave? And what did they say, where were they going? This was supposed to be their mysterious disappearance from the world, one nobody could explain, nor know about. Also, this plan only came into action after they came back to Cloud Recesses, so why would Nie MingJue say they were going away while they were still punished in Koi Tower?

“Brother Wei, I’m sorry, but I think you misunderstood something. We’re not leaving.” He shook his head. Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows.

“You’re not?”

“No.” Jin Ling said. “And if those two said otherwise, they were lying.”

“Ah, but then, why are you both studying in the library all day? Earlier, when I arrived and asked Sect Leader Lan, he said you were in the library.”

“Why is he so fucking chatty?!” Jin Ling slammed his hand on the table. “Wei WuXian, what do you think we’re studying, huh? If we want to leave, why would we study? Use your head. This is simple. We’re trying to figure out how to separate Hudie from the Yin Iron shard you, by the way, put there!”

“Ah?!” Wei WuXian’s eyes widened. “But how can that be? I’d surely never give something like this willingly to SiZhui. The Stygian Tiger Amulet is dangerous.”

“Of course it was you who gave it to him!” Jin Ling glared. “You said it to him yourself, you did it in case one of you encountered Wen RuoHan in the Nightless City.”

“Ah?” Wei WuXian made a face. “I really was this dumb back then?”

“Dumb back then, dumb all the time!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “But there’s nothing to be done with it now, is there? Once two spiritual tools merge, they’re impossible to part them without harming both.”

“So, then why are you studying ways to do so, if you say so?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Just because!” Jin Ling snapped, clearly embarrassed he came up with a weak excuse to their research. “It’s none of your business! Leave us alone!”

“Ah, I get it!” Wei WuXian suddenly said. “SiZhui, Lan Zhan received his spiritual guqin at seventeen during the Sunshot Campaign. Since this is his primary spiritual tool, it is as important to him as his sword. To have to part with it, it would be like cutting off his arm. I wasn’t there when you received your own spiritual guqin, but I know this is an important tool to those who practice musical cultivation. To have it as a resentful spiritual tool, it must be maddening that you can’t use it now, that you return to the path of the sword?”

Lan SiZhui blinked at him flatly; while this was a valid excuse, the truth was, before Jin Ling came up with this excuse, he didn’t even think of getting rid of the Yin Iron shard. The lingering resentful energy in his body, if it didn’t go away, he might never be able to return to the path of the sword. While earlier he brushed off the topic of his healing, he was aware Wen Qing had concerns about this. That she thought it might be too late, he used too much resentful energy. If this was the case, him restoring his meridians might just hurt him more. Was there even a point in trying?

“SiZhui?” Wei WuXian asked, concerned.

“It’s none of your business.” Jin Ling said after a pause. “Let us deal with this.”

“Well...” Wei WuXian hesitated, then sighed. “If you really don’t want to tell me, I won’t push. But whatever it is you’re so secretive about, you can tell me, it is safe with me. You know this, right?” He asked, looking at the two of them surprisingly mature and serious. Jin Ling huffed and looked away. Lan SiZhui smiled at Wei WuXian – this was the same he said after the Sunshot Campaign while everyone was celebrating inside, they sat on the stairs of the Scorching Sun Palace and drank their worries away. Lan SiZhui wondered if Wei WuXian remembered this as well, or forgot it with other things as well.

“We’re not telling you anything. Are you insane?” Jin Ling glared at him.

Before Wei WuXian could answer though, there was a knock on the door. Lan SiZhui glanced over at the window.

“It must be curfew already.” He said as Jin Ling stood and went over to open the door. Indeed, the guard informed them it was curfew and it was time for Jin Ling and Wei WuXian to go. Wei WuXian pouted at this.

“We barely had time to talk though!” He complained. Jin Ling just rolled his eyes. Lan SiZhui stood and smiled at Wei WuXian.

“Brother Wei, thanks for coming to check on us. I hope you’re feeling alright and this punishment won’t be too hard on you.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian nodded to him. “We’ll definitely talk soon, alright, SiZhui?” Lan SiZhui blinked at him, not understanding. How could they talk once Lan SiZhui and Jin Ling left? But of course, Wei WuXian didn’t know that they would not only leave Cloud Recesses but also this world, and thought just a month more and he would return to his normal life. He smiled at the other, then bowed.

“Thank you for all your help.”

“Ah, SiZhui! Don’t be so formal! After all, we’re sworn brothers!” He grinned brilliantly. Lan SiZhui huffed out a laugh at this.

“Sure, brother Wei.” At this, Wei WuXian’s smile softened and he nodded to Lan SiZhui.

“We’ll talk later, alright?”

“Alright.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Jin Ling eyed the two of them but said nothing. Then, the two of them left the room, saying quick good nights. As they left, Lan SiZhui could still hear their argument through the open window.

“Hey, Jin Ling, since we’re sworn brothers and I’m older than you, you should call me uncle!”

“Whose uncle are you?! Ew! Hey! Get off me!”

“Ah, Jin Ling, you’re so funny! Hahaha!”

“Who’s funny?! Lunatic!”

He chuckled as he heard the guard hush them. Then their voices faded into the night and Lan SiZhui was left alone. He was sad he couldn’t say goodbye to more people, but he was glad he could say them to at least Wei WuXian.



The *Collection of Time* was a collection of songs written in relation of time. This should’ve been obvious from the beginning, but Lan SiZhui didn’t really think about it. These were all songs gathered from the early version of *Inquiry* that could, if played with spiritual energy, manipulate time in some way.

The *Collection of Time* was built around four main songs that represented the four seasons. These were the most elaborate songs in the collection, complicated spells woven deeply into the songs, while they remained decorative as well. Would one play them without spiritual energy, they would just be some of the most beautiful songs. Played with spiritual energy, they were designed to manipulate the flow and perception of time.

These songs were created sometime between the third and fourth stages of the creation of the Qin language. The main songs were these:

*Song of Winter*, which would give a person insight into what was to come. This song manipulated a person's perception of time, making them see the future.

*Spring Again*, which was a song designed to bring a person's soul and body into a time where they did not exist. Oftentimes, this was the past. *Spring Again* had a sister song, which was *Death of Autumn*.

*Beauty of Summer* was a song that would bring a person back to their most treasured memories or worst moments in their lives. It was designed to trap a person into a never ending loop of this event, which they would not be able to escape. If applied to an ally, this would relieve them and bless them with their happiest memories. If applied to an enemy, it could trap them into their worst memories.

*Death of Autumn*, which was designed to bring a person's soul and body back to where it belonged. If a person felt they didn't belong to the age they were in, this song would bring them to the one where they should. If one was said to be an old soul, playing this song would age them. If one made poems worthy of old masters, the song would bring them back to the time where they could really prosper. It is also implied that this song could bring back people from death. This song was designed to counter the effects of *Spring Again*, which was *Death of Autumn*'s sister song.

Lan SiZhui asked the guard to notify Lan XiChen.

♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪

Lan SiZhui slowly made his way towards the Mingshi, feeling shaky and nervous. He finished studying the *Collection of Time* three days prior. He drew his conclusions of what he learned and wrote a report. That very night the report was handed over to Lan XiChen personally, who read over it while the tea in front of Lan SiZhui was going cold, Lan SiZhui way too nervous to enjoy it. Once he was done reading, Lan XiChen drew in a deep breath. Lan SiZhui looked up, expecting Lan XiChen's decision.

"How confident are you in your findings?" Lan XiChen asked.

"Based on everything I've learned about the Lan Sect's history, the history of the creation of the Qin language and the *Collection of Time* itself, I'm fairly confident." Lan SiZhui said. "Although, I would be much more comfortable if someone could confirm this."

Lan XiChen sighed and shook his head.

“If there was such a person, SiZhui, I’d certainly bring this to them. Although...” He trailed off, a thoughtful expression taking over his features. Lan SiZhui peered at him curiously. Lan XiChen then shook off whatever thought entered his head. “Anyhow, this is excellent work. If you are ready, I shall request to use the Mingshi and also request for JingYi to be let out of seclusion for a few days.”

“Would they allow that?” Lan SiZhui asked with a concerned frown. Lan XiChen hummed.

“Would they argue, I have the power to do this. I just hope they won’t argue.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes. “ZeWu-Jun shouldn’t risk so much on our behalf.”

“I wouldn’t offer if I suspected this would have long lasting consequences. The worst that can happen is that I’m reprimanded for acting irresponsibly.”

“If ZeWu-Jun is sure...” Lan SiZhui hedged unsurely. Lan XiChen smiled at him.

“I’m sure.” He picked up the report again, scanning over the characters Lan SiZhui wrote. “Thank you for your work, SiZhui.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

The message came three days later, that Lan XiChen was expecting him at the Mingshi after lunchtime. Lan SiZhui was so nervous, he could hardly finish his lunch. What if he was wrong? What if this was not the solution? What if they end up somewhere even worse? After all, *Death of Autumn’s* effects seemed to be the most unstable of the songs in the *Collection*.

However, as Lan SiZhui arrived to the Mingshi, he saw three other people there and was thankful for the distraction. Immediately, he smiled at his friends.

“JingYi.” He greeted the other affectionately.

“SiZhui! It’s been too long. An entire month!”

“Sorry about that.” Lan SiZhui said sheepishly.

“It’s fine.” Lan JingYi waved his apology off. “Hey, you look much better.”

“Hm?” Lan SiZhui asked, confused.

“You don’t look like a corpse anymore.” Lan JingYi said.

“I looked like a corpse before?” Lan SiZhui asked, looking over at Jin Ling, who shrugged.

“Don’t ask me. I don’t look at corpses for such a long time to note their appearance, unlike, apparently, other people.”

“Ch. What would Senior Wei say about that? Didn’t you learn anything in Yi City?!” Lan JingYi reprimanded him. Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“I’ve learned to never eat his awful congee!”

“Ah, you know what, you’re actually right.” Lan JingYi frowned. “That was also a very important lesson. Never get corpse powder poisoning again, but if you do, never around Wei WuXian.”

“This sounds like a fun night-hunt.” Lan XiChen raised his eyebrows at them. Lan JingYi looked back at him with wide eyes.

“It was the worst. I got corpse powder poisoning and Wei WuXian made a congee so bad, I’d have rather died. Then we learned a story of a cultivator, it was so sad, my friend couldn’t stop crying, and since I’m the type of person who also cries when my friend does, I also couldn’t stop crying!”

Lan XiChen looked skeptically at Lan SiZhui.

“Jin Ling and I helped Senior Wei make the congee.” Lan SiZhui said.

“You helped! He made me clean the whole place! It had a vile smell!”

“Cleaning helped get rid of the rubbish.” Lan SiZhui told him.

“I didn’t even get a taste for my efforts!”

“Why did you want a taste?!” Lan JingYi glared at him.

“I didn’t know he was such a bad cook!” Jin Ling defended.

“I see.” Lan XiChen interrupted before they could begin to argue more. “That sounds awful.” Lan XiChen said sympathetically, though he also sounded amused at their expense.

“I liked it better than his theatrics in the Burial Mounds.” Jin Ling shrugged. “Future *or* past.” He added.

“Mn.” Lan XiChen hummed from where he listened to them from the side. Looking over, they saw him waiting for their attention patiently. Once he had it, he addressed Lan SiZhui. “SiZhui, I’ve consulted with someone who also knows some about musical cultivation. Please, don’t be alarmed by this, they do not need the knowledge of *Collection of Time* in order to determine whether your work was correct or not. They had the same theory regarding your findings.”

Lan SiZhui was confused. Who was this person? “ZeWu-Jun?” Lan SiZhui asked.

“Ah, I shouldn’t say more. You just seemed anxious about this. I was hoping to ease your mind.”

“Well...” Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with his friends.

“I hope whoever it is, won’t even think about following us!” Jin Ling said sternly. “Lan XiChen, don’t forget, this is a serious issue. You shouldn’t just consult anyone.”



“I was being careful.” Lan XiChen nodded. “We can trust this person.”

“Was it Hanguang-Jun?” Lan JingYi asked. When Lan XiChen didn’t answer, they exchanged a look.

“Well, it better not be Wei WuXian!” Jin Ling told him next. Lan XiChen just shook his head, then gestured behind them.

“You can perform the spell in the Mingshi. I’ll ward it off once you enter.”

“Why do you need to ward it off?” Jin Ling asked, confused.

“SiZhui didn’t tell you about his findings?” Lan XiChen asked. Jin Ling shrugged.

“He did, and?”

“Well, since this song could also potentially bring anyone who doesn’t feel belongs, and also could bring back the dead...”

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun is right.” Lan JingYi said. “Having dead people walking around would be pretty freaky!”

“Right.” Jin Ling sighed. “ZeWu-Jun, I have another favor to ask.”

“Mn?” Lan XiChen hummed questioningly.

“Once we’re gone, please make sure that the *Collection of Time* is gone. Do what you will with it, but this knowledge is way too dangerous to get into anyone’s hands.”

“I’ve already arranged it.” Lan XiChen nodded. “There’s no need to worry.”

“Alright.” Jin Ling nodded. “Thanks.”

“There’s something else.” Lan XiChen said, then reached into his sleeve, pulling out his qiankun pouch. The three of them looked over curiously as he offered it. “Your weapons and other belongings are inside this.” He said. “I’ve requested them from the Jin Sect a long time ago. It almost didn’t arrive in time.”

“Ah.” The three of them looked at each other, trying to figure out who should be the one to take it. In the end, it was Lan JingYi who did, thanking it as he hid the pouch in his sleeve.

After this, Lan SiZhui stepped forward and bowed deeply.

“Sect Leader Lan, thank you for your help in this matter and previous ones as well.”

“I’m sorry not everything turned out fine.” Lan XiChen answered as he brought Lan SiZhui out of his bow gently. “But I do hope this spell works.” He looked over the three of them. “Good luck. I’ll be waiting here, just in case.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and in the end, Jin Ling bowed to him as well, then they turned and entered the Mingshi. The heavy doors creaked shut behind them, but candles and lanterns were already lit inside. They could physically tell when Lan XiChen erected the wards, the very little sound that filtered inside became muffled, and there was a sense of air stopped moving.

“Wow, this is what spirits must feel like when they’re trapped inside here.” Lan JingYi mentioned, looking around in open curiosity. Lan SiZhui understood his fascination – Lan SiZhui haven’t been inside the Mingshi without supervision either yet. This was a heavily guarded place usually. Only because the Sect Leader himself ordered to come here alone with the three of them, was that there was nobody here at present.

“Right.” Jin Ling huffed, looking around, spotting the guqin at the head of the room and marching over to it. The Lan followed him. Before they got there though, Lan JingYi suddenly halted.

“What is it?” Lan SiZhui asked, worried that they forgot something.

“Ah, it’s just... Wouldn’t we need the *Collection of Time* to do this?” He asked, looking between the two of them. Lan SiZhui reached into his sleeve and pulled out the copy he made not long ago at Lan XiChen’s orders. “Ah. Right.”

“Did you really think we didn’t bring it?” Jin Ling asked, looking at Lan JingYi like he was a complete idiot.

“I didn’t know! All I know, again, is that I’ve been in seclusion, then this morning a guard shows up and tells me that ZeWu-Jun wants to see me at the Mingshi in the afternoon. What was I supposed to know at all? Nobody tells me anything lately.” He scoffed, looking away from them. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“It’s not that we’re purposefully leaving you out. Sorry, JingYi. We can tell you what happened while we were apart?” He offered. Lan JingYi however, rolled his eyes.

“You did extensive research, figured out what spell *Spring Again* used to bring us here and you also found the counter spell. It’s not that I’m stupid. I just don’t want to be left out.”

“Right.” Jin Ling sighed, holding the bridge of his nose. “If we’re done consoling JingYi, can we begin?”

“Look suddenly who’s so eager to return.” Lan JingYi muttered to Lan SiZhui.

“Be nice.” Lan SiZhui told him, then followed Jin Ling towards the guqin at the head table.

They stopped there, looking at each other.

“Who’s going to play if Lan SiZhui’s spiritual powers are gone?” Lan JingYi asked, his face in his usual confused expression.

“Right.” Jin Ling sighed. “I’ve been learning musical cultivation while SiZhui studied the *Collection of Time*.”

“You?” Lan JingYi’s eyebrows jumped to his forehead. “You’re joking, right?” He looked between them. “Do you even know how to play the guqin?”

“As I said, I’ve been learning. Though I’m not sure I can pull this off. My teacher isn’t satisfied with the flow of my qi and he said I’m like a five year old on the guqin.”

“I’ll just play it.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“I don’t mind either way.” Lan SiZhui said, going over and sitting in front of the guqin, across the player’s seat. Lan JingYi settled in that seat, while Jin Ling stood at the head of the guqin, crossing his arms across his chest. Lan SiZhui spread the music sheets in front of Lan JingYi. “Practice without spiritual power first.” He directed.

Lan JingYi nodded, studying the notation before placing his hands on the beginner position. His eyes switched between the notation and the strings, his mouth moving as he worked it out. Then, he began to play. Lan SiZhui supervised.

“No.” He said when Lan JingYi made a mistake.

“I see it, I see it.” Lan JingYi grumbled, correcting the position of his fingers. He continued playing, though he stumbled over the score a bit, clumsy on the qin.

“Didn’t you say you used to play them all the time?” Jin Ling scoffed, eventually sitting down as well.

“Yes, and since then I fought a war and haven’t touched a guqin, give me a break.” Lan JingYi replied, annoyed. He started over. Lan SiZhui corrected when needed. The second run was better, but there were still a lot of mistakes. Lan JingYi sighed, frustrated with himself.

“Did you say you used to play it all the time just to brag?” Jin Ling asked, looking at him with a frown. Lan JingYi made an annoyed sound.

“I played *Spring Again* and another one, I don’t remember the name of it, but it was pretty. I didn’t play this, it always seemed a bit too complicated. There are a lot of difficult transitions in it.”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded, seeing those Lan JingYi struggled with. “May I?” He asked, gesturing. Lan JingYi shrugged and stood, so they could switch places. Lan SiZhui studied the score a bit, then began playing. At the difficult transition, he stopped. “Here, watch.” He said, showing the transition as clearly as he could.

“Fingers shouldn’t bend that way.” Jin Ling commented from the side.

“If you have nothing useful to add, please shut up.” Lan JingYi grumbled to him. Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Then, his eyes widened and he hit his forehead.

“Ah, you guys. We’re idiots.”

“Huh?” Lan JingYi turned to him with an irritated expression. “Jin Ling, I get that you—”

“Shut up!” Jin Ling glared at him. “How did we get here in the first place?”

“We played *Spring Again*.” Lan JingYi said, as if he was talking to an idiot. Jin Ling gave him a flat look.

“No, I mean, exactly what brought us here.”

“Your spiritual power when you tried to summon your stupid dog.” Lan JingYi said, annoyed. However, hearing this, Lan SiZhui realized the same thing Jin Ling must’ve realized just now as well. He looked at the other with wide eyes as well.

“We really are idiots.”

“What?” Lan JingYi frowned at the both of them. “Are you leaving me out of something again?”

“No, you’re just not using your brain.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “The first time around, who played?”

“SiZhui.” Lan JingYi answered, confused.

“And who did the summoning?”

“You.” Lan JingYi said, then paused, his brows furrowing. Then, his eyes widened. “We’re idiots!” He exclaimed.

“You certainly are.” Jin Ling grumbled under his breath. Lan SiZhui sighed at their antics.

“So, this time as well, I’ll play.” Lan SiZhui said. Lan JingYi grinned.

“That’s certainly easier than learning those transitions.”

“You should know those transitions. Once we return, please, practice more.” Lan SiZhui told him. Lan JingYi pouted.

“Who will summon? What should we summon? Should we even summon?” Jin Ling asked then.

“As far as I understand, the intent of the spiritual power doesn’t matter.” Lan SiZhui said. “Although it is not impossible...” He shook his head. “No, it shouldn’t matter. As long as there is spiritual power directed at something present, the spell should work...” He trailed off, thinking. Musical cultivation was a precise method. Even that they managed to activate the spell while not actively feeding spiritual energy into the play itself had always confused Lan SiZhui. Although when they first started figuring out musical cultivation, their ancestors also didn’t use spiritual powers to play either. Only, once they did, did they figure out that it could amplify the effects music had on people. By logic, music itself had to have an effect, and spiritual energy only amplified it. However to cast without purpose was a strange concept to Lan SiZhui. “Although, just to be safe, try to summon Fairy again.”

“Fairy isn’t here though.” Jin Ling frowned.

“She is at home though.” Lan SiZhui shrugged. “Maybe if you concentrate on her, it ensured we return to the correct time.” He shrugged again at the two questioning looks he received. “The song should bring us back anyways, but we can’t be cautious enough.”

“Alright. I can do that.” Jin Ling nodded. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Let me go through the song once more without spiritual power, just to make sure I can make the transitions.” Lan SiZhui requested. Jin Ling nodded and they waited until Lan SiZhui finished playing, then the three of them exchanged a look.

“Good luck to us.” Lan JingYi said.

“In case we die, this was all JingYi’s fault.” Jin Ling said.

“Why the fuck would we die?!” Lan JingYi looked over, scandalized. Lan SiZhui couldn’t help but laugh at them. They both looked over, looking surprised at this. Lan SiZhui waved them off.

“Sorry.” He chuckled, trying to calm down. “I think I’m just nervous.”

“Well, the other possibility is that JingYi suddenly developed a sense of humor.”

“It’s reassuring that it didn’t even occur to you that it was you who he laughed at.” Lan JingYi said smugly. “It shows that you have finally learned some self-criticism.”

“Alright, SiZhui, start playing. I need Fairy to bite JingYi’s face off.” Jin Ling told him. Lan SiZhui shook his head, amused. But then, he ducked his head and concentrated on the notes, and began playing.

*Death of Autumn* was so decorative, the difficult transitions made sure that this song was only played by true experts. Even without spiritual energy, it gave the listener a sense of belonging there to listen to this song, enjoy the tunes and the expert play. If Lan SiZhui had the privilege to listen to this from someone who practiced it regularly, he would surely be impressed. He played parts of it while he was researching, but he didn’t practice enough for it to be as smooth as it could be. It probably didn’t sound like it for those who were not practiced in it, but Lan SiZhui could tell his play wasn’t the most fluent. Still, the song was beautiful and enjoyable.

He didn’t look up to see what the others did. Because of the state of his meridians, he also didn’t sense whether Jin Ling cast the spell or not. He just played the best he could. The Mingshi was quiet and the atmosphere was serene. Lan SiZhui played patiently, although he did make a few small mistakes, he didn’t stop or correct himself, but finished the song. Mistakes clearly didn’t matter; back then when he played *Spring Again*, he also made mistakes as well, and they still ended up in this time.

The song came to a natural close and Lan SiZhui let the strings resonate for a moment longer before he gently placed his hands over them, quieting the instrument. Once the notes faded, he looked up, finding his friends looking at him as well.

“Uh, do you feel any different?” Lan JingYi asked them. Lan SiZhui shook his head. Jin Ling shrugged.

“I feel like I listened to a nice song.” At this, Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “Let’s go out and see.” Jin Ling prompted. The two of them agreed and they gathered their things, heading outside.

Once at the door, Jin Ling stopped for a moment, hesitating. Then, he took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

Lan SiZhui didn’t know what he expected. That everything would look completely different, alien for them? That there would be people waiting for them on the other side? Well, someone was there, but it wasn’t the people they hoped to see. Lan XiChen turned from admiring the view to them, looking just as they left him there a few minutes before. The four of them just looked at each other for a long moment, then Lan JingYi asked:

“Well? Did it work?”

Lan XiChen opened his mouth two or three times, although said nothing before he shook his head. “It’s been half an hour at most.” He said.

“Well.” Jin Ling said, his shoulders slumping. “That’s...”

“Not bad?” Lan JingYi offered, looking over at them. “At least we didn’t end up in a time where, I don’t know, Wen RuoHan was a child or something.”

“And we didn’t die.” Jin Ling added.

“Again, why would we die?” Lan JingYi glared at him. “We performed a spell. Not—” He gestured vaguely around. “Fought dragons or I don’t know.”

“I don’t know what went wrong.” Lan SiZhui frowned down at his copy of the *Death of Autumn*. “It should’ve worked. I thought...” He trailed off, disappointed in himself. Then there was a hand on his shoulder. Looking up, Lan XiChen smiled at him reassuringly.

“You’re a good cultivator, but these techniques are ancient and unknown. It was not your fault.”

Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I’ll go back to the library and read through the texts again. Maybe I missed something.” Lan XiChen pressed his lips together and nodded.

“Ah, can we help?” Lan JingYi asked, eager. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I’ve had to study the texts for almost a month. I know them well.”

“Ah... Alright.” Lan JingYi said, sounding disappointed. Lan SiZhui wanted to apologize, but he didn’t know how.

“I think maybe JingYi should also practice the score.” Jin Ling offered. “That transition you couldn’t do.” He clarified at Lan JingYi’s questioning look. “Maybe our first instinct was

right and the player should cast the spell as well. Once JingYi can play it correctly, we should try again.”

“Alright.” Lan XiChen nodded to them. “JingYi, your practice guqin should still be in your rooms.” He paused, then said: “In the light of this, I’ll try to consult the elders to excuse your seclusion for a few days. If I cannot, you may bring your guqin to the seclusion room. I’d say WangJi will help to learn the transitions, but I’m afraid he takes his punishment seriously. He even chided me for letting Wei WuXian visit him earlier this week.” He huffed, amused with his brother.

“Me and Jin Ling will go back to my rooms and practice then, until the elders decide.” Lan JingYi said. Lan SiZhui handed over the copy of *Death of Autumn*.

“I’ll have some disciples go over and put up some wards, just to be safe.” Lan XiChen offered. “Go ahead, I’ll close up the Mingshi.” He said. The three of them bowed to him then departed, shoulders slumped, disappointed.

## Empathy III.

Lan SiZhui didn't remember falling asleep. He must've returned to his rooms at some point from the library, for this was where he woke, although for the first time since he had been brought to Koi Tower, he woke in a bed. Ever since he was whipped, even the thought of sleeping horizontally frightened him, for he was too afraid lying on his back and awakening the searing pain in his back. Although he was now lying on his side, he quickly sat up, feeling an ache in his back muscles he hadn't noticed before.

If he didn't have to return to the library, he would happily return to the healing Cold Springs to offer relief to his back. However, the spell they've tried the day before didn't work. He had to return and figure out where he went wrong with it. He thought he understood the spell. He thought he figured it out, only to realize he failed. He sighed sadly.

He got up and headed to change his night clothes. He was surprised to find white GusuLan clothes prepared for him. He frowned, unsure if he should wear them. Since he was no longer part of the Sect, he really shouldn't. However, he didn't have many other options. This could only be Lan XiChen's doing, but what purpose it served, he didn't know. He still put it on. He was surprised to also find a forehead ribbon draped over his privacy screen and felt that this was too much. The elders clearly stated they wanted nothing to do with Lan SiZhui in the Lan Sect.

Placing the ribbon on his table, he drank some tea, mentally preparing for his day. The day before he was so confident, even Lan XiChen had someone – probably Lan WangJi – take a look at his work. Why didn't it work? There was no implication that the player needed to cast as well. It just didn't make sense. The only explanation was that Lan SiZhui misunderstood the *Collection*. Or was it because *Death of Autumn* was supposed to bring them back to a time they belonged to – was this where they belonged?

He sighed again, finishing his tea and standing. It was strange that today the guards didn't bring him food, but he had only half a mind for it, eager to return to the library and figure out what went wrong. He exited his rooms and found no guards standing there. Lan SiZhui found this strange as well. Why weren't there guards today? Maybe Lan XiChen really did think it would work and called them off, preparing the room for a different disciple, that's why there was a different set of robes there?

He pondered this for a moment, but decided not to dwell on it. Lan XiChen knew he would research further in the library. If he wanted to place guards there, that was fine. Lan SiZhui turned to go to the library, however, he barely left the disciple dorms when he heard commotion ahead. He paused, hearing Jin Ling's loud voice and knew this could only mean trouble. Taking a deep breath, he headed that way. Soon he found the source of the commotion and briefly stopped in his tracks.

Jin Ling was also wearing different robes. While in the past few weeks he wore indistinct robes, just like Lan SiZhui, today he was dressed in Jin gold, a nicely embroidered robe he



would have expected from before they arrived. He was also shamelessly holding Huangfeng, clearly ignoring Lan XiChen's earlier request to keep it concealed.

However, this wasn't the most surprising thing. Jin Ling was arguing with Lan XiChen, but also in front of him stood Jiang Cheng. The Young Master of the Jiang Sect looked a bit different than Lan SiZhui last saw him. He was in silver and purple robes, an elegant hair ornament decorating his features. When Lan SiZhui last saw him, he was dressed for his sister's wedding, also elegant, though not this decorated. Lan SiZhui figured, since neither Jiang YanLi, nor Wei WuXian were home, Madam Yu could only set her expectations on her son and make him the Sect Leader she thought fit to lead after Jiang FengMian's passing or retirement.

It was Lan XiChen who noticed Lan SiZhui arriving, looking over with a sort of dazed, shocked expression. Lan SiZhui stepped forward next to Jin Ling, bowing to the two respectfully.

"ZeWu-Jun, Young Master Jiang."

"SiZhui. You're here as well." Lan XiChen said, although his tone matched his expression.

"What's going on?" Jiang Cheng asked, frowning at Lan SiZhui. He blinked at the other.

"Young Master Jiang, what do you mean?" Lan SiZhui asked. He glanced at Jin Ling, who was just staring at the other man angrily. Figuring maybe Jiang Cheng haven't received the news, he said: "Ah, did your father not say? After we confronted Clan Leader Su, your father and ZeWu-Jun agreed to have us transferred here to spend the rest of our punishments."

"Don't waste your breath, he probably knows." Jin Ling waved him off. Lan SiZhui glanced over, then back at Jiang Cheng.

"Ah, then... Young Master Jiang, may I ask what you're doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious?!" Jin Ling scoffed, looking the Jiang Sect heir up and down. "He's here to take Wei WuXian back!"

"What?" Lan SiZhui's eyes widened and he looked back at Jiang Cheng. "Ah, is it true? But... ZeWu-Jun, I thought you and Sect Leader Jiang agreed to this."

"SiZhui." Jin Ling huffed. "Don't be daft. We've forged letters before, don't you think Wei WuXian can't? It is clear as day." He turned to Lan SiZhui, then stopped. Lan SiZhui looked over his shoulder at where Jin Ling was looking; it was Lan JingYi hurrying to catch up with them.

They waited until he got there.

"Ah, you guys!" Lan JingYi exclaimed. "My guards are nowhere to be seen and nobody brought me breakfast, so I came to see what was going on."

"The same thing happened to me, too." Lan SiZhui nodded. Lan JingYi seemed to only just noticing the other two and quickly bowed.

“Young Master Jiang, ZeWu-Jun. Ah, Young Master Jiang... What are you doing here?”

“He’s here to take Wei WuXian back, obviously!” Jin Ling said.

“What? Really?” Lan JingYi frowned at him.

“Mn!”

“But... Ah, a few days ago Wei WuXian visited me and when I asked him, he said he had permission from both Sect Leader Jiang and Sect Leader Lan. He said even Madam Yu gave her blessing. How is this possible?”

“I was just explaining to SiZhui.” Jin Ling said. “Clearly, the letters were forged by Wei WuXian!”

“Ah?!” Lan JingYi looked at Jin Ling with wide eyes.

“Would you—” Jiang Cheng began, but Lan JingYi began talking again.

“No, it can’t be! I’m sure even if the letter was forged, Lan XiChen would’ve noticed it. Wei WuXian is surely here on Sect Leader Jiang’s orders!” Lan JingYi said with conviction. “It can’t be that something happened, right?” He looked over at Jiang Cheng. “Young Master Jiang, is everything alright? There wasn’t another assassination attempt on Jin ZiXuan, was there?”

“Huh?” Jin Ling blinked at Lan JingYi, seemingly surprised he didn’t think of this and also looked over at Jiang Cheng with wide eyes. “Is that true?!” He demanded. “Did something happen?”

“ZiXuan... You—What—?” Jiang Cheng asked back, staring at the other wide eyed as well, sputtering without making a point. Jin Ling clearly got impatient and his hand flexed on Huangfeng.

“Well? Say it already! Did you just come on Madam Yu’s orders to take Wei WuXian back to Lotus Pier, or did something happen to Jiang YanLi or Jin ZiXuan?! Or what, did Jin GuangYao escape?”

“Oh, no!” Lan JingYi also got frightened. “We worked so hard to contain Jin GuangYao, it really can’t be that he escaped. Although... Ah, you guys!” He suddenly exclaimed.

“What?” Jin Ling whipped around to look at him and Lan SiZhui also turned to him.

“We forgot about something. This just occurred me, thinking of what we talked about with Lan XiChen yesterday. We forgot about Xue Yang!”

There was a stunned pause, then Jin Ling seemed to fall in thought. He shook his head then.

“I don’t know exactly what went down with that delinquent. I think my uncle took him as a disciple after the Sunshot Campaign, but how exactly his story went down, I don’t know.” He clicked his tongue. “The YiLing Patriarch would know, but there’s no saying otherwise.”

“Ah, this is really bad.” Lan JingYi chewed on his lip. He stepped forward and addressed Jiang Cheng. “Young Master Jiang, say, did something really happen?”

“What—” Jiang Cheng began, but was cut off once again, this time by a cheerful call. There was a commotion on the side and they looked towards the inner buildings, where Wei WuXian emerged, jogging towards them. Unlike the last time they saw him when he was also wearing nondescript robes of the Lan Sect, he was now wearing his usual dark and red robes. This made Lan SiZhui pause – was Jiang Cheng really here to take Wei WuXian back?

“Wait, you guys!” Wei WuXian called over, hurrying over, grinning widely.

“What?” Jin Ling demanded. “Do you know why he’s here?!” He gestured rudely at Jiang Cheng. “Did you lie about Sect Leader Jiang allowing you to come here? Or is it something else? Someone say it already!”

“Why are you so impatient?” Wei WuXian scoffed at him.

“Because...!” Jin Ling began, only to realize he couldn’t tell Wei WuXian. He turned to Lan XiChen. “There’s a dangerous criminal still roaming free. We forgot about him. Lan XiChen, you were willing to help us so far. We need to find him and bring him to justice.”

“Ah, Jin Ling, are you conspiring again?!” Wei WuXian shook his head. Jin Ling glared at him.

“You, stay out of it! And I’m asking again; what is Jiang Cheng doing here? Did you lie?”

“I didn’t lie!” Wei WuXian shook his head proudly. He looked over at Jiang Cheng with a grin. “I know why he’s here though. Jiang Cheng, we’re back!”

“I can fucking see that!” Jiang Cheng exclaimed. From the bamboo surrounding the disciple quarters, some birds flew up at this. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with the others. Jiang Cheng then took a deep breath, closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

“Young Master Jiang, are you alright?” Lan SiZhui asked tentatively. Jiang Cheng opened his eyes and looked at Lan SiZhui with a kind of contempt he hadn’t experienced from the Jiang Young Master before. It caught him a little off guard and he took a step back.

“Would all of you just shut up and let me get in a word?” Jiang Cheng asked slightly calmer, glaring sharply at Jin Ling. Jin Ling huffed at this, glaring back and crossing his arms across his chest. When there was silence for a few moments, he turned to Wei WuXian. “Explain. Now.”

“Ah, Jiang Cheng, it’s—” Wei WuXian began, however, before he could say more, someone called his name and he turned. Another person joined now. Lan SiZhui watched in confusion as Lan WangJi walked towards them. He exchanged a look with his friends, then looked at Lan XiChen.

“ZeWu-Jun, was Hanguang-Jun also excused from seclusion?” Lan SiZhui asked. Lan XiChen blinked at him.

“Seclusion?” He asked, confused, which confused Lan SiZhui. Truly what was going on? Everything was so strange.

“Brother.” Lan WangJi greeted Lan XiChen. “What’s going on?” He asked. Lan XiChen took a deep breath, then turned to the three of them where they stood almost facing the four of them. Lan WangJi’s mouth dropped open as he looked at them. It was a surreal expression on him.

“Um.” Lan JingYi began. “Are you... What’s going on? Ah... Did they change their minds and we need to go back to Koi Tower?”

“You were never in Koi Tower.” Jin Ling said without looking at him.

“Well, it’s not like I had a choice! I kowtowed to Lan XiChen and he still refused. What was I supposed to do, fight him?”

“It’s probably better that you didn’t.” Wei WuXian said.

“Stay out of it.” Jin Ling repeated.

“Stay out of it, it’s none of your business, is that all you can say to your poor old uncle?”

“I’m definitely breaking your leg.” Jin Ling glared. “And since when are you my uncle? You were so happy to be my sworn brother.”

“I’m happy to be just in your life!” Wei WuXian grinned at him.

“Hey!” Jiang Cheng suddenly snapped, another exclamation worthy of scaring the birds away – if there would’ve been any remaining. “Someone say already what the fuck is going on!” Jiang Cheng demanded, glaring at his brother, who laughed awkwardly, patting his shoulder that Jiang Cheng shrugged off with a scowl. That was odd.

“Ah, I was just about to tell Lan Zhan, but I was rudely interrupted. How about this, how about I explain?” He tapped his own chest twice. Lan WangJi glanced over at Wei WuXian, seemingly also confused.

“Then fucking out with it already.” Jiang Cheng said. “You seem to be the only one who knows what the fuck is going on.”

“Ah, WanYin...” Lan XiChen began, but Jiang Cheng waved him off! This was rather rude from the Young Master towards the Sect Leader!

“Like you don’t share the sentiment, ZeWu-Jun. I’ll copy whatever you want for my language later, now I want an explanation.” He said also rudely. Lan SiZhui exchanged a confused and a bit scandalized look with his friends.

“Ah, you guys, do you remember when you tried to perform the spell yesterday?” Wei WuXian asked. Naturally, this had Jin Ling riled up quicker than anything else, and he immediately took up a fighting stance, drawing Huangfeng without an arrow.

“I’ll kill him, I swear!” Jin Ling glared at Wei WuXian, who yelped and hid behind Lan WangJi, who didn’t move at all. “Wei WuXian, what the fuck did I say about staying out of our business?! Do you think Madam Yu’s punishment was harsh with Zidian?! You’ve clearly never been shot with Huangfeng!”

“Alright, alright!” Lan JingYi stepped forward, putting a hand uselessly on Jin Ling’s drawing arm. “I’ve said before, I’ll say it again, MouShi, you’re getting more and more violent.”

“JingYi! I told him to stay out of our business. I’ve told him at Cloud Recesses, but he kept butting his nose into it, I told him during the Sunshot Campaign and he still kept bothering us, I told him at Qiongqi and he still came with us, I told him before the Burial Mounds and he still stayed, I even told him before Nightless City, but he couldn’t leave us alone. This thing is private and I draw the line! How dare he butt his nose into this matter, while it clearly doesn’t concern him at all?! Wei WuXian! You saw what happened to Su MinShan, don’t be fooled, back then my spiritual powers were weak due to imprisonment, I’ve been healing in the Cloud Recesses for a few weeks now, you’ll definitely not survive this!”

“Ah, Jin Ling, listen to me first, alright?!” Wei WuXian asked. Jiang Cheng huffed and reached out, as if he was going to take Huangfeng, but Jin Ling’s bow turned on him fast as the other took a step back.

“Whoa!” Lan JingYi reached out to hold both of Jin Ling’s arms, pushing them down, which the other let him do. “Alright, let’s just listen to Wei WuXian’s explanation first, alright?!”

For a long moment it didn’t seem that Jin Ling was going to listen to him, glaring at both Jiang disciples. Then, he said: “Lan XiChen, this is an offense not to be taken lightly. You know the consequences. These are the Lan Sect’s secrets as well. I expect Wei WuXian to suffer the worst of your horrible punishments.”

“Ah…” Lan XiChen opened his mouth, looking over at Wei WuXian, who just pressed his lips together apologetically.

“I’ll explain first, alright?” He asked the Sect Leader. Lan XiChen huffed, then nodded.

“Don’t point that thing at people.” Jiang Cheng scoffed at Jin Ling.

“I’ll point it at whatever I want.” Jin Ling answered, glaring at Jiang Cheng, who returned it tenfold. Lan SiZhui haven’t seen this much animosity between the two before. They were both awkward teenagers with temper issues and so far they got along fine.

“Ah, good. Okay.” Wei WuXian sighed and shuffled out from behind Lan WangJi. “So, remember how you thought you failed at the performance of the spell?” Lan SiZhui looked over sharply. Wei WuXian blinked at him. “Ah, SiZhui, I’m not saying your play was bad.”

“I know it wasn’t bad.” Lan SiZhui said. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“How do you know anyways? Were you eavesdropping on us?” Jin Ling scoffed. “Shameless! Lan XiChen, do you tolerate this?!”

“I’m sure once the explanation is heard, this all makes sense.” Lan XiChen said. “Please, let him continue.”

“Fine. But once he is done, I wasn’t kidding. This is an offense towards you. Don’t be a coward and punish him accordingly.”

“You—!” Jiang Cheng glared at him more intensively, as if taking offense on the behalf of the Lan Sect Leader, which was also strange. Or as if he was about to lecture Jin Ling about respecting the Sect Leader, which was also strange, seeing that they were the same age, there wasn’t really a good explanation for that. Lan XiChen looked at Jin Ling with a surprised expression, like he didn’t expect this from the other either. He was seemingly about to respond, but Wei WuXian spoke before him.

“No, actually, I was inside the Mingshi with you!” Wei WuXian continued. Jin Ling took a deep breath. Lan JingYi held him visibly straining against Jin Ling’s arms to keep them down and not let him raise Huangfeng again. “ZeWu-Jun actually let me inside!”

“Why did you do that?!” Jin Ling glared at Lan XiChen. “Did you... Did he... Why?!” Jin Ling sputtered. “You know what the spell was, what could be the reason, this is insane!”

“ZeWu-Jun, I don’t understand.” Lan SiZhui frowned as well.

“You’re not the only one.” Jiang Cheng huffed, clearly annoyed.

“I’m just as confused.” Lan XiChen shook his head, looking over at Wei WuXian. The other sighed.

“You guys, you still don’t get it?” He asked.

“Wei WuXian.” Jiang Cheng said in a threatening tone, then turned to his brother. Seeing motion around his hand, Lan SiZhui looked down and saw... Zidian?! Sparkling on his finger?!

“Ah... Young Master Jiang, why do you have Zidian?” Lan SiZhui asked, a little alarmed. Jiang WanYin in the future only received the ring once Madam Yu was dead. Jiang Cheng turned to him then, glaring. “Is everything alright with your family?”

“Zidian?!” Jin Ling also glared at the ring.

“What are you talking about?” Jiang Cheng barked. “Where else would it be, if not with me?”

“With Madam Yu, what are you talking about?” Jin Ling scoffed. “Did something happen to her, is that why you’re here?” He asked, looking over at Wei WuXian. The other was shaking his head.

“Ah, no, you guys, it’s—” He began, but Jiang Cheng actually cut him off, looking at Jin Ling intensively.

“My mother had been dead for almost two decades now, A-Ling.” He said darkly. Lan SiZhui felt himself and his two friends at his side freeze as well. “What are you talking about, ‘is Madam Yu alright’?”

“But... But that can’t be.” Lan JingYi looked over at his friends. “Didn’t we just see her not that long ago?! In the Nightless City?!”

“We definitely saw her at Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan’s wedding!” Jin Ling nodded, glaring at Jiang Cheng. “Don’t play with us and tell us the truth! Did something happen to her?!”

“You guys, don’t be purposefully dense!” Wei WuXian sighed dramatically. Lan SiZhui frowned at him in confusion. Wei WuXian scoffed. “Your spell! Do you really not get it?” Wei WuXian asked. “Just look at Jiang Cheng or even ZeWu-Jun! Use your heads! Do I have to spell it out?!”

“I’m not—!” Jin Ling began, looking over at Jiang Cheng and cutting himself off, scowling and looking the other up and down slower this time than he did the last time.

Lan SiZhui also observed as Wei WuXian asked, looking the other up and down. He then looked over at Lan XiChen, not understanding. Sure, he wore slightly different clothes than usual, and he had a different hair ornament... As had Lan WangJi, Lan SiZhui noted. He recognized this ornament. This was the high ornament Lan SiZhui gifted him when he went on his first practice hunt at thirteen... But how could he wear this ornament, when he never raised Lan SiZhui and Wen Yuan was only a toddler? Could it be another one of those tricks time played with them, when they changed so much, yet the events stubbornly remained the same? But that couldn’t be either, since this piece was a different style and made with different techniques...

Oh.

There was, after all, a very simple explanation. Lan SiZhui looked over the others as well. How did they not notice before?

“Ah, now they get it.” Wei WuXian said, as if a very difficult student finally understood the lesson.

“It... worked?!” Lan JingYi exclaimed. Lan SiZhui flinched slightly from the unexpected volume. He turned to him and Jin Ling, who was also looking at them wide eyed. “You guys, it worked!” Lan JingYi grinned, sounding breathless.

“It worked?” Jin Ling asked slowly. “That means what I think it means, right?” He asked, throwing a look over at Wei WuXian, who just raised an eyebrow pointedly. “We’re back. Back to...”

“Back in the future.” Lan JingYi nodded. Then, he grinned and turned to Lan SiZhui. “You didn’t fail. It must’ve taken effect late. Ah, you remember, right? After we played *Spring Again* as well, we didn’t even notice. All I remember is that I couldn’t recall how I went to sleep, and now, too. And I’m pretty sure Jin Ling was still in my room by my last memory,

and he definitely didn't sleep there! I remember something about sending him away, after annoying me to death!"

"I woke in the guest rooms, but I couldn't recall how I got there." Jin Ling confirmed with a nod. "Then, when I woke up, I ran into Jiang Cheng in the compound. I went to confront Lan XiChen about it, but before we got there, he showed up. That is when Lan SiZhui and later you turned up."

"So..." Lan XiChen spoke up and they looked over, seeing him watching Wei WuXian. "You went back as well and worked out a spell that would bring you back. This is why you've also been gone."

"Yes, ZeWu-Jun." Wei WuXian nodded.

"You went back?" Jin Ling frowned at Wei WuXian. "What does he mean?"

"Ah, you guys..." Wei WuXian held his head. "You're really bad at this, aren't you?"

"Huh?" Lan JingYi blinked at him.

"However..." Lan XiChen took word again. "How does that explain..." Lan XiChen gestured at Wei WuXian. He raised his eyebrows.

"Ah, well, I was also in the Mingshi when they performed the spell that brought them back." Wei WuXian said, throwing a questioning look towards Lan WangJi. Lan WangJi then looked away from Lan SiZhui, whom he was watching all the while, and over at Wei WuXian.

"Wei Ying is not in Mo XuanYu's body anymore." He said. "I also hurried after you to ask."

"Huh?" Wei WuXian frowned at him, then looked down, as if noticing for the first time as well. To be fair, Lan SiZhui didn't even notice until it was pointed out. Though he hardly had time to comprehend they were back in the future either, so this was not that surprising. Wei WuXian patted down his chest, then looked up and over at Lan SiZhui. "Ah, Lan Zhan is right. SiZhui, how is it possible?"

"I don't—" Lan SiZhui began to say, but then cut himself off. But he knew. "Ah... *Death of Autumn*."

"That's the score that brought us back, yes." Wei WuXian nodded. "ZeWu-Jun – ah, not you, the one from the past – gave me your report to confirm whether your theory was correct."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, not too surprised, now that he suspected Wei WuXian also traveled back in time. How long had he been with them? Why didn't he say anything? How did he go back? He shook off these thoughts, cataloging them for later. "Remember, in my report. *Death of Autumn* is a score that was written with specific intentions and notations. This implied the song would bring a person back to where they belonged in soul and body. It also implied that it didn't matter whether the person was alive or not."

"Ah, right, I remember. But... I wasn't dead here?" He looked skeptical. Lan SiZhui shook his head.



“The death is not the point. The intention of the song is to bring the person back, soul and body, to where they belonged. If the spell recognized you also belonged here, it didn’t matter whether you already have a body here.”

“Wait.” Jin Ling scoffed from the side. “You’re saying there is Mo XuanYu’s corpse somewhere out there, rotting away right now, because Wei WuXian didn’t return into it?”

Lan SiZhui shrugged the best he could. “Maybe. *Death of Autumn* is one of the most unstable songs of the *Collection*. Who knows what did it do to Mo XuanYu?”

“Ew.” Jin Ling said this and nothing else. Next to him, Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“Naturally, MouShi is devastated learning his late uncle is dead once again.” He said in a flowery speech.

“Watch your tongue. We’re in our own time now and I’m Sect Leader once again.” Jin Ling said, though there was no real threat in his voice, and as if he just remembered this himself, he straightened up. Lan JingYi just shrugged.

“How about you watch your tongue?” Jiang Cheng suddenly spoke up and Jin Ling’s eyes widened. “Is ZeWu-Jun not a Sect Leader in this past you’ve gone to?”

“Well, yes—” Jin Ling began, but Jiang Cheng – Sect Leader Jiang – cut him off.

“Then just how shameless are you, going around, calling him ‘Lan XiChen’?!”

“He allowed it!” Jin Ling pointed a finger at Lan XiChen – ZeWu-Jun. Sect Leader Jiang reached out and made a motion to grab Jin Ling’s finger, but the other stepped away quickly.

“And to point your bow at anyone of present company, let alone me?! How did you plan on shooting, anyways, without any arrows?!”

“It’s—” Jin Ling began, but was cut off once again.

“You’ll apologize, A-Ling, now.” Sect Leader Jiang demanded. “I don’t care who you thought we were. Did you talk to me like this in the past as well?! Aren’t you ashamed?!”

“I’m ashamed, I’m ashamed!” Jin Ling answered with a scoff. “If you let me speak, I might even apologize to ZeWu-Jun.”

“How dare you—”

“How dare I, how dare you?!” Jin Ling raised his chin. “I’m Sect Leader. You can’t speak to me like this anymore. I’m not some insolent child you have to punish.”

“A-Ling.” Sect Leader Jiang glared, Zidian sparking on his finger.

“Ah, Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi stepped forward. “Tone it down.” He murmured to the other, then turned to Sect Leader Jiang. “Ah, Sect Leader Jiang, excuse MouShi for his behavior, until

ten minutes ago, we thought we were still in the past, so it will take a moment to get used to these dynamics again.”

“Someone tell me already who the fuck is MouShi.” Sect Leader Jiang scoffed at him.

“What, you don’t like it?” Jin Ling asked from behind Lan JingYi. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what had gotten into Jin Ling to speak to his uncle like this, although... It was rather hard, having to address those they got used to being in the same age group with, with respect fit to seniors again.

“What is it even supposed to mean?” Sect Leader Jiang asked, confused.

“I don’t know.” Jin Ling shrugged. “Madam Yu meant it as an insult, but apparently, it fits.”

“Madam—” Jiang WanYin began, then shook his head. “Why do you keep talking about my mother?”

“Ah, Jiang Cheng, it’s actually really cool!” Wei WuXian said. Then, he pressed his lips together at Jiang WanYin’s look. “Or, well, not that cool.”

“What?” Jiang WanYin scoffed at him.

“Well... Ah, but why don’t we retire somewhere more comfortable? There’s a lot to tell you about these guys’ trip.”

“Trip?” Jiang WanYin scowled. “My nephew, the Jin Sect Leader had gone missing for two fucking years, and you call this a trip?!”

“Wait.” Lan JingYi frowned. “We... went missing for the same amount of time we were in the past?” He asked, looking over at Lan SiZhui, probably hoping for an explanation, however, Lan SiZhui had none, so he shrugged as much as he could.

“It’s early still.” ZeWu-Jun said. “Why don’t we all regroup after breakfast in the Lanshi?” He proposed, looking around present company, then frowned a little. “Ah, actually... The Lanshi might be a bit too small for this gathering.”

“The Reception Hall.” Lan WangJi – Hanguang-Jun offered. ZeWu-Jun thought for a moment, then nodded.

“I’ll inform the elders of these developments.”

“Alright, fine.” Jiang WanYin agreed. “A-Ling, come on.”

However, Jin Ling just frowned at him, remaining where he was. “I’m good, thanks. I’ll just stay with SiZhui and JingYi.”

Jiang WanYin blinked at him. “This wasn’t a request.”

“That’s fine, I wasn’t asking either.” Jin Ling scoffed. Before it could get out of hand though, Wei WuXian placed a hand on Jiang WanYin’s arm.

“Ah, leave them to it, Jiang Cheng.”

With a jerk, Jiang WanYin shook off Wei WuXian’s hand, then, glaring at his nephew, the man turned and stormed off towards where he came from. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with his friends. This was very strange to see the brothers so at odds after having gotten used to them getting along just fine in the past.

“Let us meet in the Reception Hall in half an hour.” ZeWu-Jun said, and the three of them bowed to him as he also departed. The only two remaining were Wei WuXian and Hanguang-Jun. The five of them exchanged looks, then Wei WuXian took hold of Hanguang-Jun.

“Let’s go Lan Zhan, we will be able to talk to them later.” Wei WuXian prompted. Hanguang-Jun watched them for a moment longer, then nodded jerkily before following Wei WuXian back.



“So, we’re back.” Jin Ling observed once they returned to Lan SiZhui’s room. They received breakfast not long after ZeWu-Jun departed, so they didn’t even have to stop to bring food. As soon as the door closed behind them, Lan JingYi activated a silencing charm out of habit, and the three of them sat around the table to eat. Once the food was gone, they began to talk.

“It seems unreal.” Lan JingYi commented. “But at least, we did it.”

“I don’t know how Lan XiChen had the face to let Wei WuXian inside. How did he even come to the past?” Jin Ling frowned.

“Right?” Lan JingYi looked over with wide eyes. “I didn’t even notice the change!”

“When did it even happen?” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “He was with us the whole time expect when we were brought back to receive punishment.”

“Ah, I know!” Jin Ling snapped his fingers, looking over them. The two Lan looked over at him curiously. “Don’t you remember? After Madam Yu stabbed him, since then he had this weird memory problem.” Lan SiZhui’s eyes also widened as he followed Jin Ling’s logic. He was right. After Wei WuXian woke in the village, he was acting really strange. All those times he couldn’t remember obvious things, as he continuously referred to previous events as if they didn’t happen to him. Lan SiZhui also remembered, back then, Wei WuXian even approached him, claiming he knew their secret and that it was time travel. How did he not realize then?

“Why didn’t he tell us?” Lan JingYi asked with a frown.

“You’ll have to ask him that.” Jin Ling shrugged.

“Right, about that.” Lan JingYi bit his lip. “Wei WuXian knows some of our story, but... Do we actually tell them everything?” He asked. Jin Ling looked at him with a frown.

“What do you have to hide, huh?”

“I just mean... Look how Sect Leader Jiang reacted to you calling Lan XiChen—well, ZeWu-Jun Lan XiChen. If they learn about what we’ve been up to...”

“They judge easily.” Jin Ling waved him off. “We’ve lived through war, it’s not like we purposefully acted like this.”

“They also fought the same war.” Lan JingYi said.

“Was it the same though?” Jin Ling asked. “We saved Madam Yu and Jiang FengMian. We offered a good solution against the puppets. We used different tactics and because of that, we also didn’t fight for as long as they have.” This reminded Lan SiZhui of something.

“Isn’t that strange?” Lan SiZhui spoke up for once, and his friends turned to look at him. “I mean, Sect Leader Jiang said his mother had been dead for almost two decades. This means here... This is the same future we left, isn’t it?” Lan SiZhui asked, looking between the two of them.

“Ah, you’re right.” Jin Ling frowned. “I didn’t realize... But, how could that be?” He asked, looking at Lan SiZhui. “I thought we’d come back to the future we’ve created. Wasn’t this your theory?”

“Well, yes...” Lan SiZhui answered hesitantly. “I thought everything we change in the past will have an effect on the future.”

“Wait.” Lan JingYi narrowed his eyes as he looked into the air as he thought. Then, he took a deep breath. “If we changed the future... The Jiang Sect heads stayed alive. Wei WuXian stayed with them as well. Well, before he came back to the past as well, he would have. But even if he left, he left with them being on relatively okay terms.” He paused, then said: “In the past we created, Lan SiZhui... Ah, hey, SiZhui. Did you speak with Lan XiChen about the Wen?” He suddenly turned to Lan SiZhui. He nodded.

“What about the Wen?” Jin Ling asked with a frown.

“Well, now that SiZhui knows, I can say it. After you left Nightless City, we stayed behind for the night. Then, the next morning, Lan XiChen asked me and Lan WangJi to take them to the village where the Wen hid. Naturally, I declined, but Lan WangJi didn’t. He led us there. Upon arriving, Wen QiongLin was waiting for us with the Wen, expecting to be invaded. However, then Lan XiChen took him aside and talked to him. I don’t know the exact details, but I know that Wen QiongLin considered leaving after this, possibly with his grandmother and cousin.”

“Leaving to go where?” Jin Ling asked next.

“Nobody knows.” Lan JingYi shook his head. Jin Ling considered this, then huffed and nodded.

“Alright. So, Wen Ning left. And? Why are you listing these events?”

“Right. So, in the past we created, SiZhui grew up with them presumably, not taken to the Cloud Recesses. Also presumably, you were raised by your own parents. And I came to Cloud Recesses as I had in the future as well. So, did we even get to know each other?”

“Not if my parents raised a sensible person.” Jin Ling huffed. Lan JingYi threw him a flat look, then continued:

“Well, but if we didn’t meet, if we never went on those night-hunts together... If we never become friends... If Jin Ling’s parents stayed alive, if Jin GuangYao was truly imprisoned, there was no reason for him to visit the Cloud Recesses on a diplomatic mission, and end up in SiZhui’s rooms, especially if SiZhui didn’t even have rooms, since he was raised by his grandmother Wen and Wen QiongLin.”

“Are you getting at something or just listing possibilities?” Jin Ling scoffed. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“I think I know where you’re going with this.” He told Lan JingYi. “In the past’s future, we never met under the circumstances we did, therefore what went down didn’t happen there either. Wei WuXian was never the YiLing Patriarch, so there was no need to investigate. Jin GuangYao was never Sect Leader, since we had him arrested. He didn’t kill Nie MingJue, so he didn’t come back as a spirit. You, me and Jin Ling might never even met in the past either, so we couldn’t have performed *Spring Again*, therefore we never traveled back in time and changed the past.”

“Exactly.” Lan JingYi nodded. “Whatever we changed had gone undone the moment we changed it.”

“Wait.” Jin Ling frowned at them. “You mean all our efforts, everything we did... We did for nothing?”

“Essentially... Yeah.” Lan JingYi shrugged. Jin Ling glared at him, his nostrils widening in anger.

“So, whatever we did, my father still died. Whatever we did, my mother still died. Whatever we did, everything happened exactly the same, because by altering the past, we also altered the future where we went back, therefore we never went back.”

Lan JingYi made a face of sympathy. “Sorry.” He said quietly.

Jin Ling looked grim and sad. This was understandable. They have worked hard to change the past, to make sure that the evil acts they had to suffer the consequences of didn’t happen this time around. Jin Ling had been so enthusiastic about the idea of saving his parents, he advocated for this since they’ve arrived to the past. To learn all of this was in vain... This must’ve been devastating for him.

Lan SiZhui also felt the weight of this. Although he didn’t manage to save a lot of people with his actions, he still came to care deeply about the Wen he grew up with. Despite not knowing them well, they were his family and he fought to save them. To think that all he did was in vain... The history books he managed to convince Lan XiChen to save from Wen

RuoHan's library... Wen Ning and A-Yuan... His grandmother, his family... All he did for them was gone. They were gone forever and he could do nothing about it.

However, after a few moments of quiet, suddenly Jin Ling's eyes widened and he jumped on his feet. Startled, the two Lan looked up at him, as he stepped up to Lan JingYi and began to tug his robes open. Lan JingYi, naturally, cried out in fright and tried to wrestle him off himself.

"Jin Ling!" Lan SiZhui also got on his feet, ready to rescue his friend.

"Get off me!" Lan JingYi complained. "What are you doing, let go of me!" He finally pushed Jin Ling away, tugging his clothes back in place. "What is wrong with you?!"

"Show me your back!" Jin Ling demanded.

"What?!" Lan JingYi glared at him. "No! Are you out of your mind?!"

"Just show me!" Jin Ling said, glaring back.

"No! Why would I do that?! What is it all of a sudden?! Are you cursed or something?!"

"JingYi!" Jin Ling exclaimed. "Do you still have the whip marks?!"

"Wha—Of course I have them! I'm not going to strip and show you though!" At this, Jin Ling huffed and dropped back to where he'd been sitting. Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi shared a look as Lan SiZhui slowly sat as well, cautious. "What the fuck, MouShi?" Lan JingYi asked. For once, Lan SiZhui agreed wholeheartedly. This was quite an extreme display from the other. Jin Ling clicked his tongue, annoyed.

"It's proof."

"What?" Lan JingYi frowned, looking over at Lan SiZhui questioningly. Lan SiZhui shrugged, not knowing what Jin Ling meant either.

"It's proof!" Jin Ling repeated, looking over at Lan JingYi. "If you still have the scars, that means that what we did was not an illusion."

"Well—" Lan JingYi shrugged, still holding his robes closed at the front of his chest. "No, I guess not. But there's no need to start ripping off my clothes like that! For a moment I thought you were qi deviating."

"Whatever." Jin Ling said awkwardly, looking away. "But this means that in some other time, I still managed to save my parents. This wasn't just an illusion or whatever. The past wasn't gone the moment we changed something."

"Next time just ask like a normal person." Lan JingYi muttered.

"What next time?!" Jin Ling glared at him. "I'm never touching you again." At this, Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“You better not, because I won’t hesitate to kill you then.”

“So, in the end, whatever future we created, it wasn’t the future where we belonged.” Lan SiZhui said once they all calmed down. This was a curious thought though. *Death of Autumn* was supposed to bring them back to a time where they belonged – but how did it decide this?

“I guess that makes sense.” Lan JingYi said. “You said the song works this way; it’s supposed to bring the person back to where they belong.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, still pondering on this. “I think then this might be the answer.” He hummed thoughtfully. “We created a future, only, it wasn’t ours to live...”

“Wasn’t it though?” Jin Ling frowned. “We worked so hard. You even became the enemy of the cultivation world just to save the Wen and I as well, to save my parents... Was that truly not the place we were supposed stay?”

“I guess, since we came from this time, we were never supposed to stay there. It was just a fluke.” Lan SiZhui said.

“That’s kind of sad.” Lan JingYi frowned. “We put in so much effort, yet we have to return to this future.”

“Do you not refuse rewards for a night hunt?” Jin Ling proposed. Although his earlier words hinted he also found this disappointing, now he spoke up like this – Lan SiZhui suspected just to contradict his friend again. “Don’t be greedy. Do you even have anything worthy in that future? Think about me. I have my parents there and SiZhui had his Wens there as well. Just think about it. We have much more to lose like this.”

“You’re saying this as if you were so much better.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “You equally wanted a future where you were raised by your parents. Besides, this is the same. We don’t accept rewards, true. But knowing that the people we saved will live, that’s reward in itself.”

“Incredible, on both fronts you say the right thing and still miss the point completely.” Jin Ling huffed. At Lan JingYi’s look he said: “Sure, I wanted to be raised by my parents. But that would never happen anymore, would it? After all, I’m already an adult.”

“Technically still a junior...” Lan JingYi murmured under his breath. Jin Ling swatted him with his sleeve.

“Anyways. The other thing, knowing you saved people, if that’s your reward, you still received it. After all, somewhere in another time the Jiang Sect heads, the Nie Sect Leader, my parents and most of the Wen remnants are also alive.”

“Fine.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. “You’re right, was that what you wanted to hear?”

“I don’t need to hear it to know it.” Jin Ling shrugged with a condescending look towards Lan JingYi.

Lan SiZhui huffed, amused, looking over and out the window. He noted it was significantly lighter outside. “I think our time is up.” He informed the others. Now they will have to go

and tell the others everything. What was going to happen to them, once their seniors learn what they did?

“Let’s go then.” Jin Ling stood. As the others stood as well, he turned to Lan JingYi. “Regarding what we tell them, if you don’t know, just leave it to me.”

“Just leave it to you?” Lan JingYi scoffed as they exited Lan SiZhui’s rooms. “You just want to lead the narrative to appear in a better light, don’t you?”

“What narrative are you talking about? Who am I, Jin GuangShan?!”

“You are his grandson, after all! Just look at those affectionate words you parted from him with! ‘I’m saying this as someone who grew up without a grandfather’! Ah, Jin Ling, you really are the most tragic hero of your own life!”

“You!” Jin Ling raised Huangfeng threateningly, but Lan JingYi just danced away from the threat with a laugh.

“Me, me, me! He would be proud to call you a Jin disciple, Jin Ling!” Lan JingYi laughed delighted.

“I’m going to break your legs! Come here, don’t run away!”

Lan SiZhui sighed, shaking his head and following them at a more sedate pace. He didn’t know how Lan JingYi wasn’t sore from running around with the whip marks still on his back. Lan SiZhui’s own marks throbbed deeply with every move, and again, he longed for the Cold Springs of Cloud Recesses. However, they needed to talk to their seniors first.

Lan SiZhui was nervous. He knew what he did he did because at the time he thought they were the right things to do, that he was following his morals, therefore staying true to himself. This was a lesson Hanguang-Jun wanted to teach him so long ago and Lan SiZhui hoped that he learned it properly. However, this didn’t mean that these people would approve of these things. More so, Lan SiZhui was positive they wouldn’t approve. How could they? To stray from the orthodox path, to kill for revenge...

Lan XiChen in the past was forgiving because Lan SiZhui was not his disciple. Sure, they both belonged to the Lan Sect, well, Lan SiZhui formally, but at the end of the day, the Lan Sect Lan SiZhui grew up in was a completely different Sect than the one Lan XiChen of the past grew up in. That Lan XiChen was never the ZeWu-Jun Lan SiZhui knew; he was not the same person who partially raised Lan SiZhui. He also changed a lot during the Sunshot Campaign, by the end, he was nothing like how Lan SiZhui knew his own ZeWu-Jun to be. Who knew how much their changing the past also changed those who had the right to judge them? How would those react who truly knew who they were?

Also, in this world, these people, from his own future, they knew well enough just how dangerous and corrupting resentful energy, demonic cultivation was. Jiang WanYin was rumored to hunt down demonic cultivators to torture and kill them. How could Lan SiZhui not be nervous?



“SiZhui, are you coming?” Lan JingYi asked from already inside the Reception Hall, looking over his shoulder at Lan SiZhui. Lan SiZhui looked around, not even having noticed that they’ve arrived. He took a deep breath, then pressed his lips together and entered.

The others were already there. At the place of the host, where in a Cultivation Conference the Lan Sect Leader would sit, now sat Lan QiRen. Upon seeing him, Lan SiZhui froze. It was as if his legs grew roots into the ground. If he was nervous before, now he was definitely scared. Hanguang-Jun was often lenient with the rules, and ZeWu-Jun also had a gentle personality, so their misguided actions might’ve been excused by them. Lan SiZhui had no illusions to think the three of them wouldn’t be punished about these things, both their misconduct of having stolen and played songs from the Forbidden Room. He also knew their actions would eventually be reported to the elders, this was unavoidable. However, to have Grandmaster Lan there, one of the elders, would mean that the moment their confessions about the past left their lips, they would be judged.

Also Lan QiRen wasn’t just any person. While Lan SiZhui thought of Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian as his adoptive fathers, it couldn’t be denied that they were too young still, when he was growing up. While their relationship also resembled that of a father and a son, it also resembled one of teacher and student as well as big brother and little brother. Lan SiZhui never dwelt on these things, for it was never required of him to actually give account on who these people were to him. However, Lan QiRen was different. He was nor young, nor inexperienced at raising a child. He was Lan SiZhui’s granduncle, but also the only person who truly resembled a father figure in Lan SiZhui’s life. He could forgive himself for disappointing Hanguang-Jun and Senior Wei, but to disappoint Grandmaster as well, it was an entirely different matter.

To the left of Grandmaster ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun conversed quietly, looking over once the three newcomers entered. Wei WuXian was sitting already at one of the tables, while Jiang WanYin was standing near him, but not close enough to talk. Lan JingYi bowed to Lan QiRen, then went over to one of the tables to Lan QiRen’s right, as did Jin Ling. Lan SiZhui was still unable to move. Grandmaster looked up then, and his eyes immediately found Lan SiZhui standing in the door. His brows furrowed deeply.

“SiZhui.” He called over, his deep voice familiar in the slightly chiding tone, in the way Lan SiZhui’s name rolled off his tongue. Lan QiRen was once again his teacher and granduncle, unlike when they were in the past and he was just a person who found him suspicious and strange. Standing before him felt like Lan SiZhui was already judged and sentenced a failure. “Where is your ribbon?”

Lan SiZhui’s eyes widened. Surely, Lan QiRen of this time didn’t know yet, just how much his student disappointed him. Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun paused their conversations, looking over at the question as well. Not knowing what to say, instead of answering, Lan SiZhui bowed as deep as he could with his sore back and greeted the Grandmaster.

“Grandmaster Lan, greetings.” He said formally. Lan QiRen frowned at him. Lan SiZhui didn’t wait for his dismissal in fear of more questioning, going over and sitting next to Lan JingYi. This might’ve been rude, but in light of recent developments and for the fact he was no longer part of the Lan Sect, Lan SiZhui let himself do so. Grandmaster glared at him

disapprovingly, but said nothing. His friend said nothing either, as he prepared some tea for the three of them.

ZeWu-Jun finished talking to his brother, then went over to the door, where a disciple was waiting. ZeWu-Jun exchanged a few quiet words with him as well, before the disciple nodded, bowed, then closed the door. Then, ZeWu-Jun applied a dulling ward to the whole building, and Lan SiZhui suspected the surrounding area as well.

The silencing talisman the juniors preferred to use was different than this. The silencing charm required a completely sealed room, while a ward such as this could be applied to a general area. During the Sunshot Campaign, they used this as well at times. This prevented from anyone to listen in to conversations that went on in the area, but it was also combined with some disorientation charms as well. This meant that not only could they not be heard, the spy would have a hard time seeing them as well. Nothing said here could be recorded.

ZeWu-Jun then went over to his place and sat, prompting anyone who hasn't yet to sit as well. Once everyone was seated, Grandmaster Lan schooled his features from his frown to a strict expression and spoke up.

"So, your reports were correct. The three missing teenagers and Wei WuXian really returned."

"Yes, uncle." ZeWu-Jun nodded in answer.

"XiChen, you might find this unnecessary, however, I still ask. Have you checked if they're not yao, or other supernatural creatures?" He asked, eying Wei WuXian where he lounged next to Hanguang-Jun, sniffing into his tea, making a face, then shrugging before drinking the whole cup in one sip.

"Uncle." ZeWu-Jun looked at the Grandmaster with a sharp look, but only received a similar in return. ZeWu-Jun sighed, then said: "Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui are wearing Lan Sect robes. The protective talismans woven into the fabric would've harmed them by now, if they were yao."

"And the others?" Lan QiRen cocked an eyebrow. At this, Wei WuXian grinned.

"Ah, Grandmaster, isn't the Cloud Recesses warded against spirits? Surely, if we were yao or something similar, we wouldn't be able to be here."

"Mn." Lan QiRen made a face as if he wasn't at all satisfied with this answer, but he didn't fuss. Seemingly this was all he wanted to ask, because then, ZeWu-Jun took over, turning to the three of them.

"Sect Leader Jin, JingYi, SiZhui. We're glad to have you back."

"Ah, thanks, ZeWu-Jun." Lan JingYi said, though he didn't return the pleantry, glancing at Jin Ling.

“As you already know, the three of you have been gone for almost two years. I don’t mean to pry, but we’ve discovered you played a score from the *Room of Forbidden Books*. This score is called *Spring Again*. Upon extensive research, we’ve figured out that this score was designed to manipulate time and the perception of time. Because of this... May I ask... Where, or, more accurately, when have you been?”

The three of them exchanged a look, then Lan JingYi turned back to ZeWu-Jun.

“Ah, Sect Leader Lan, the truth is, this is a rather... long and complicated tale. It would surely take a really long time to recount everything that’s happened.” He said, then hesitated, before he asked: “Could you perhaps tell us first, what happened here while we were gone?”

“Besides, I’m Sect Leader of the Jin Sect.” Jin Ling said, crossing his arms across his chest. “I’d like to know what happened to my Sect while I was gone.” He glared at Wei WuXian angrily, who looked surprised, then laughed delightedly.

“Ah, Jin Ling! So, you figured it out!”

“So it’s true?!” Jin Ling snapped, jumping on his feet, pointing at Wei WuXian. “They really elected you to lead my Sect?!” He exclaimed angrily, then turned to Sect Leader Jiang. “And you! How could you let this happen?!”

“Watch your tongue!” Jiang WanYin glared back. “What was I supposed to do?! I have my own Sect to lead.”

“Still!” Jin Ling glared.

“Don’t think I didn’t try!” Jiang WanYin told him. “But what could I do?! I’m your martial uncle, not your father.” He frowned.

“Ah, Sect Leader Jin, please, don’t be upset.” ZeWu-Jun tried to placate. “Naturally, this was the Jin Sect’s elders’ decision in the end.”

“Besides, he wasn’t really leading the Sect.” Jiang WanYin added. “He was a puppet, only Sect Leader in name. The Jin Sect elders graciously took over the decision making.”

“You let those idiots be in charge?!” Jin Ling seethed. Jiang WanYin took a deep breath, Zidian beginning to spark on his finger. “Weren’t you the one who told me continuously not to trust them?!”

“I couldn’t replace them though, could I?” Jiang WanYin glared. “And I wasn’t about to let Wei WuXian elect your new elders. So, yes. I left them in their positions.”

Jin Ling worked his jaw angrily for a few moments, then with a huff, he sat back down, crossing his arms over his chest again.

“Jin Ling, don’t worry. Jiang Cheng is being humble. In reality, he spent as much time in Koi Tower as in Lotus Pier, to oversee the Jin Sect.” Wei WuXian smiled at him reassuringly. Jin Ling rolled his eyes and didn’t comment. Jiang WanYin on the other side also rolled his eyes.

“Right.” Lan JingYi cleared his throat. “So, what happened while we were gone? How did you even know we played *Spring Again*?”

What they told them was this:

Hanguang-Jun was waiting for Jin Ling to show up for the previously agreed appointment to discuss some business that was designed to ease Jin Ling into the role of being the Sect Leader – nothing too diplomatically challenging, but still important enough for the Sect Leader to handle. A disciple informed him half an hour into waiting that the Jin Sect Leader still hasn’t emerged from his rooms. Getting impatient, Hanguang-Jun requested the disciple to fetch Lan SiZhui, so they could get started on the day’s duties instead. However, at this, the disciple reported that Lan SiZhui hadn’t attended his morning classes and nor did Lan JingYi. Finding this suspicious but not yet alarming, Hanguang-Jun figured that the two were doing something together and they failed to inform their disciple mates.

Then, later that day, the disciples reported that the Jin Sect Leader was still secluded in his rooms and Lan SiZhui didn’t show up for his afternoon classes either. Seeing that Lan SiZhui was supposed to hold these classes, Hanguang-Jun became concerned, for it was not Lan SiZhui’s personality to disappear without informing anyone.

Once it became clear that neither of the three would show, Hanguang-Jun decided to take matters into his own hands and visited the guest quarters, finding Jin Ling’s rooms empty. Next, he went to look into Lan SiZhui’s and Lan JingYi’s rooms as well, but they were the same. Even their weapons were missing, causing Hanguang-Jun to believe they left on their own volition instead of being kidnapped.

However, looking into Lan SiZhui’s room, Hanguang-Jun found it strangely messy, empty cups and almond peels all around the table, as well as some soggy music scores where a fallen over cup’s contents soaked it.

Seeing this, Hanguang-Jun was instantly alarmed, for this messiness was incredibly uncharacteristic, so he ordered the guards to turn Cloud Recesses upside down, and find the three missing people. They searched for three days. Hanguang-Jun sent letters to Lanling, Qinghe and Yunmeng to inquire if the three had been around. All came back with a negative answer. Finally, Hanguang-Jun notified the most important people about this; his brother, the Jiang Sect Leader and Wei WuXian. Since the latter had been travelling, he requested him to return to Cloud Recesses as well.

ZeWu-Jun came out of seclusion from worry. Sect Leader Jiang arrived two days later, yelling himself hoarse and disturbing the tranquil peace of Cloud Recesses, although he accomplished nothing with this. Wei WuXian arrived a day after Jiang WanYin. Once again, peace was disturbed when Sect Leader Jiang accused Wei WuXian of doing something shady to the boys.

Wei WuXian, after being yelled at and explaining he had been night-hunting in Qishan and had nothing to do with any of this, began to investigate. In Lan SiZhui’s rooms, he found evidence. Nobody thought much about the music scores in Lan SiZhui’s room, which was, in

Wei WuXian's opinion, pretty dumb from the Sect that routinely practiced music to fight. Upon examining the music scores, ZeWu-Jun confirmed that most were from the common collections everyone could access to, however, there was one sheet that was not, it was, in fact, from the *Room of Forbidden Books*. This one sheet must have fallen out of a loosely bound book.

As they began investigating the books from the Forbidden Room then, ZeWu-Jun found several books were disturbed. Wei WuXian prompted they examine those books that have been disturbed, see if any were missing and also to see if there was any amongst them that would've somehow prompted the boys to run away suddenly.

During this time Jiang WanYin went off to search Lanling and other places, make sure his nephew and his two friends were not there for sure. Wei WuXian in secret even set Wen Ning onto this task.

Investigating the books and searching the land for the three took them quite some time. Three months to be exact, and by then, the Jin Sect also realized something was wrong. Jiang WanYin graciously informed the Nie Sect about the disappearance of the Jin Sect Leader, then began to manage the Jin Sect as best as he could, staying in endless discussions with the Jin elders about how to handle the situation. This situation was so dire though that even ZeWu-Jun had to travel there and join the discussions while Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi continued to investigate.

The sixth month marked the end of the Jin Sect elders' patience. Sect Leader Jin had been missing for so long now, they began looking into blood relatives, to see who would be able to take his place as Sect Leader. Jiang WanYin and ZeWu-Jun did their best to manage the Jin Sect, but due to their outsider status, there was not a whole lot they could do.

Eventually, ZeWu-Jun had no choice but to summon all major Sects and big Clans for a discussion conference, to break the news to those who didn't know yet and to help the Jin Sect elders elect a new temporary Sect Leader. Since this was an occasion not to be missed, Wei WuXian and Hanguang-Jun also traveled to Koi Tower to take part in the discussion conference.

On this discussion conference was then, that the major Sects and bigger Clans learned of Sect Leader Jin's disappearance and chaos descended onto the cultivation world. Suddenly, everyone claimed to have a member of their Clan who was secretly Jin GuangShan's illegitimate son, a daughter who married one of their members, or a woman who was promised marriage via token by Jin GuangShan, weren't they also up for this position?

With the situation getting so out of hand, it was actually the Nie Sect representative, Sect Leader Nie who suggested an ancient tradition. Everyone knew the Jin Sect kept records of the relatives of the Jin Sect, even of those who were illegitimate. Because of this, not everybody could just claim to be related in a situation like this, but the elders could consult this directory and decide like so.

So, the directory was brought out of the Jin treasure vault, with the sharp and distrustful looks of the elders. The eldest blood relative still alive related to Jin Ling on his father's side was a person named Jin ZiShang, who was the fifth cousin twice removed of Jin GuangShan's.

However, this person was severely injured during the Bloodbath in the Nightless City, and his wife claimed he was more useless than trying to catch a fish on a tree.

The Jin elders proposed he would be only a Sect Leader in name, what would it matter if he was useless or not. However, then they were prompted to say the next person, which was the father of one of Jin Ling's cousins, Jin FengTi. However, Jin FengTi was apparently a drunk, and the City Guard even spoke up, claiming he was currently in one of his cells because the night before he got drunk, was indecent in public and tried to force himself on a girl.

This led them to the third name on the list, which was inevitably Mo XuanYu. At this, people really didn't know what to say. Mo XuanYu was kicked out of the Koi Tower years before for offending the Sect Leader Jin GuangYao, however, his crimes only went this far. Sect Leader Jiang revealed Mo XuanYu was dead, to which several people pointed out he was standing right next to Jiang WanYin. Even Wei WuXian spoke up and explained the situation, but to people, it didn't matter. An argument broke out between those who wanted their own Clan members on the Jin Sect's throne and those who legitimately just wanted to solve the situation. In the end, somehow the people were convinced that Mo XuanYu was, indeed, the best choice to be made. This had probably something to do with the fact that the next name on the list was a person also related to Clan Leader Yao.

Reluctantly, even the Jin elders accepted this. Wei WuXian was distressed, since he didn't want this position at all, not to mention he felt he would be more use to investigate instead. However, the decision was made regardless of his own wishes. Wei WuXian was fairly certain Nie HuaiSang, the Sect Leader Nie had a lot to do with that, based on the shy congratulations he offered Wei WuXian. However, regardless of this, all he could do was to stay after the discussion conference wrapped up.

Jiang WanYin and ZeWu-Jun aided him when he spoke with the Jin Sect elders about his new position. Thankfully, the two Sect Leaders managed to convince the elders that since Wei WuXian was only ever intended to be a puppet while the elders would lead the Sect anyways, there was no need for him to actually stay and try to manage the Sect. Jiang WanYin even proposed to act as a counselor to the Jin Sect Leader, effectively taking over the role regardless of Wei WuXian's title. Since officially he was only an advisor and not Sect Leader, this also didn't cause problems with his own Sect.

So, Wei WuXian returned to the Cloud Recesses while Jiang WanYin managed to lead the Jiang Sect and advise the Jin Sect in Wei WuXian's name as well. While most decisions were left to the elders, this worked similarly to how the Cloud Recesses was run for a decade before ZeWu-Jun took over his duties as Sect Leader officially. The elders were in charge, however, the important decisions were to be discussed with the acting Sect Leader.

Wei WuXian's investigation finally revealed the source of the three boys' absence eight months into their disappearance. This news brought great relief to those involved in this. Onto how to undo the spell, it was decided that Hanguang-Jun and Wei WuXian would attempt to also use the score *Spring Again* and find the boys wherever they were lost in time and bring them back. However, upon playing the song... nothing happened.

This wasn't like how it had been for the three of them, that they thought the spell didn't work, but in the end, it did. For days, months, Wei WuXian and Hanguang-Jun attempted playing

the song in hopes this would bring them to the same place it had taken the three of them, however, time remained stubbornly the same.

Three months of this, and they began to give up hope. Wei WuXian and Hanguang-Jun investigated *Spring Again* and the *Collection of Time* as thoroughly as they could, but found no indication of why their attempts did not work. However, despite the three boys' disappearance, life didn't stop. Jiang WanYin was doing the best he could, but having to manage two Sects at once proved to be too much even for him. Wei WuXian had to go to Koi Tower and manage the Jin Sect while being mindful of his powerless position.

Thankfully, he grew up having helped Jiang WanYin learn the ropes to being the Sect Leader, and while he never had a great insight into what this entailed, he was the head disciple of Lotus Pier and because of that, he knew the daily struggles and tasks that needed to be taken care of. Sure, the Jin Sect wasn't looking for a head disciple in Wei WuXian, but part of the Sect Leader's duties were to manage the teachers, and in this, Wei WuXian had experience in, since he was head disciple, he knew how to manage disciples. He found managing the teachers was almost the same, with the addition of these people being older and having much more self-respect, not doing Wei WuXian's bidding just because he told them so.

Another duty of the Sect Leader was to manage inter-Sect relations, and in this, he also excelled, for ZeWu-Jun and Jiang WanYin mostly took care of it and all he had to do was to give his nod of approval to their propositions. Dealing with Nie HuaiSang was not this easy, but he found his former friend did not wish to wrong him and his proposals were also reasonable. Wei WuXian found that Sect Leader Nie also liked to propose deals to him in a way that one would think he was teaching Wei WuXian what a deal entailed.

With bigger Clans, Wei WuXian did not have such an easy time with. He was actually struggling with some, for they were self-righteous and uptight. When months into this Hanguang-Jun visited him and proposed he help out, Wei WuXian took his help gratefully, for Hanguang-Jun excelled dealing with such people by simply ignoring their snobbish nature and pushing his own will onto them, as long as it was reasonable.

Other than this, Wei WuXian didn't really want to get into leading the Jin Sect and left it up to the elders to make other decisions that didn't need his input. According to Jiang WanYin, the elders might've been Jin GuangYao's enablers, but he found while working with them that they weren't completely unreasonable and even reluctantly admitted their way of thinking was just like any other Sect elder's he ever knew.

With this fragile trust in the elders and Wei WuXian dancing on strings to the other Sect Leaders, the Jin Sect's situation returned to a temporary state of normal.

The next nine months were spent like this.

While they had to return to everyday life, their seniors didn't forget about the missing three boys. ZeWu-Jun left seclusion in order to return to the head of the Lan Sect, so his brother was free to continue his investigation into the disappearance of the boys. Hanguang-Jun roamed the land, this time not to help where needed, but to learn as much as he could about the scores stored in *Collection of Time*. At one point, he even traveled to *Dongying*, the homeland of *Collection of Turmoil*, since the other *Collection* also contained songs using

spiritual energy to manipulate the qi differently than how the Lan cultivated. With this, he also hoped to learn more about how the *Collection* was written, since they also noticed similarities between it and the old Qin language *Spring Again* was written with. He hoped that, even though the Lan had refined their methods and by then nobody lived for centuries who knew the ideas behind creating songs with the old Qin language, perhaps there were still people in distant lands who didn't refine the language further and still used the old Qin language, able to give him explanation.

However, this journey turned out to be completely useless. Nobody could help Hanguang-Jun with this, since nobody in *Dongying* used musical cultivation at all. They theorized that the person who wrote the collection must've visited their land and hearing the songs of the spirits, written these songs inspired by this. However, the songs of the spirits were nothing related to the Qin language.

Disappointed, Hanguang-Jun returned home.

Whenever Hanguang-Jun visited Wei WuXian, they played *Spring Again*, hoping that one day the score would work and bring them back. This, however, didn't happen until a year and eight months into the disappearance of the three boys.

That day was spent like many before it. Wei WuXian woke in Koi Tower and had to attend some duties, before he could join Hanguang-Jun for a late lunch. Jiang WanYin was in Lotus Pier, but he sent word that he would visit in a week, so Wei WuXian looked forward to that, since every time Jiang WanYin visited, he would yell at Wei WuXian that he did things wrong, then manage to do them himself instead.

After lunch, Wei WuXian returned to his duties, then the two shared dinner as well. After dinner, Wei WuXian proposed they try playing *Spring Again*.

This was very typical of Hanguang-Jun's visits. They would spend some time together and always, every time without fault, attempt to play the song, in hopes this time around it would have different results.

It never had. Until this time.

Wei WuXian stood across Hanguang-Jun in the room he claimed for himself in Koi Tower, and together, they played the decorative and peaceful song of *Spring Again*, a silencing charm firmly in place, preventing anyone else from hearing the secret melody of the Lan Sect. Just like every time, as they brought the song to its end, they looked at each other, awaiting anything to have changed. Like every other time, there was no change. Wei WuXian was by now familiar with the disappointment this brought, and so he just smiled at Hanguang-Jun and sent him to sleep, then went himself, though he couldn't be able to later recall when he did or how. He had murky memories of sitting at his desk, pouring over night-hunt reports, then nothing much, like when he was still a teenager and couldn't judge how much alcohol was too much and drank himself until he couldn't remember what he did.

In the morning, however, he didn't wake in his rooms in Koi Tower.



He woke feeling a stabbing pain in his abdomen and feverish. Looking around, he saw a shabby looking room. For a moment, he thought he was back at Mo manor in Mo XuanYu's rooms, but this house was even more shabby.

Then a familiar face leaned over him and Wei WuXian thought he had to be dreaming, seeing his long dead friend, Wen Qing looking down at him with a familiar scowl. She told him something, but Wei WuXian was too shocked to listen, then she poked him with her needles and he fell asleep again.

He was in and out of it for a while. Every time he woke he saw Wen Qing's face and thought he must've died or something. But then, once he woke, he was much more alert, not feeling so feverish anymore. Wen Qing was there again and spoke to him, but he was unable to answer. He didn't feel like he was dreaming anymore, but he must've gone mad to see dead people.

Wen Qing told him she was going to fetch Lan WangJi. Then, a little later she returned, only behind her was Lan WangJi and Wen Ning. Happy to see his friends, Wei WuXian immediately began asking what happened, where were they? Were they still in Koi Tower? Why was he feeling like he had been stabbed? And anyways, why did Wen Ning look like he never died?

The ghost, or what he thought at the time was the ghost of Wen Qing then examined him again while Lan WangJi began transferring him spiritual energy. Wei WuXian noted that the Golden Core in his body felt much stronger than the one in Mo XuanYu's body, but didn't think much of it. Lan WangJi told him he was injured. He was acting strange, but Wei WuXian didn't mind that. This whole situation was strange. Then, soon after this the ghost of Wen Qing announced she was getting the others and left.

After transferring enough spiritual energy that Wei WuXian felt better, Lan WangJi said he was going to play for him. Then, Wen Ning also left, claiming he had some things to take care of. Wei WuXian complained that he was not properly looked after, after all, he was apparently injured, although nobody told him how or where they were.

Then, soon enough, people entered again. The ghost of Wen Qing yelled at him, but Wei WuXian ignored her, thinking this was only his imagination, and if he went to answer her, surely, Lan WangJi would think he was crazy! However, then Lan SiZhui showed up! Wei WuXian at this time still thought they were at home, in the future. Hearing Lan SiZhui's apology regarding his injury, he thought maybe Lan SiZhui returned some time ago, since Lan WangJi didn't seem surprised to see him there, and however Wei WuXian got injured had to happen during that time he couldn't recall after going to bed.

Then Jin Ling and Lan JingYi also showed up and Wei WuXian felt like he could weep from relief. He wanted to cry to Lan WangJi about it, only then Wen Qing spoke again and Jin Ling actually answered! Hearing another person react to what Wei WuXian thought only existed in his own head completely shocked him.

He quickly realized the situation was not at all how he thought it was! He listened to the others talk and couldn't even care where or when he was, he was just really glad to see them again.

In the meantime, in the future, Hanguang-Jun and the others had no idea this happened. Hanguang-Jun was a guest in Koi Tower for the time being, so not having seen Wei WuXian, he didn't think much of this. However, then he wanted to inform his friend that he was leaving and the servants informed him they could not find Wei WuXian since two days ago. Hanguang-Jun had a feeling of this having happened before and so, he didn't panic. He still investigated, in case he was wrong, but finding the same signs, having confirmation from both ZeWu-Jun and Jiang WanYin that they haven't seen him lately either, he befell the same fate as the three juniors had before. Hanguang-Jun also wanted to try to play and bring himself back, however, at this point, ZeWu-Jun actually forbid everyone from playing this song.

He reasoned nobody even knew if they were still alive or not. They had been careless as it was, to play *Spring Again* so he didn't want to risk anyone else's life. He reasoned, if Wei WuXian ended up where the three others were, if they were all alive, Wei WuXian was smart enough – he would definitely figure out how to bring them back.

They also explained it all to the Jin Sect elders, and ZeWu-Jun proposed they wait a little while until they announce this. It was not a long time ago they had to hold such a conference, and it would be bad if they had to hold one right away. Reluctantly, the elders agreed. Jiang WanYin also agreed to continue advising the Jin Sect, while also taking care of his own Sect. This went on for the next few months. Then, Jiang WanYin had a Sect business to discuss with ZeWu-Jun, so three days ago he arrived to the Cloud Recesses, only this morning, he ran into Jin Ling in front of the guest rooms.

Once they said all this, Jin Ling stood and went over to one of the windows, his back to the room. His shoulders were straight and pulled back, his hands laced together behind his back; he was surrounded by the air of a seasoned Sect Leader who was considering everything that he just heard.

Lan SiZhui figured he had a good reason to think like this, after all, of the three of them, he was the only one whose status didn't let him to disappear for two years without a word. Lan SiZhui was only the head disciple, while his duties in supporting the Sect Leader and occasionally holding a lecture, nothing more important waited for him here. Lan JingYi wasn't even head disciple, though he was the second, and occasionally helped out, he had less duties to attend to.

“So, we were right.” Jin Ling said after some consideration, turning back to Wei WuXian and the others. “You took Wei WuXian's place after Madam Yu stabbed him.”

“Mn.” Wei WuXian nodded grimly. Jiang WanYin next to him looked between the two, frowning.

“What are you talking about?” He asked, but nobody answered him as Jin Ling went back to his place.

“Ah, we'll tell you. Right, guys?” Wei WuXian looked over at them. “Let's tell them what happened.”

“Uh...” Lan JingYi glanced over at Lan QiRen, then at Jin Ling. “Ah, MouShi, you wanted to lead the narrative.” He gestured at Jin Ling, who glared at him, picking up Huangfeng.

“You—!”

“There’s no need for violence.” ZeWu-Jun said from the other side placatingly. “Why don’t you begin from the start?” He prompted. “Tell us; how did you come across the *Collection of Time*? What prompted you to play *Spring Again*?” He frowned. “Why would you play such a score with spiritual power?”

“Ah.” Lan JingYi sighed. “Since you already know, we will tell you.” He said, sounding a little disappointed.

“Right.” Jin Ling said, then turned to ZeWu-Jun. “But if we tell you, you cannot hold us responsible for any of it. JingYi was dumb but he suffered the consequences of his actions. Actually, we were all in a difficult situation. Everything we did in the past we did because we felt we had no other choice. What does it matter anyways, since nothing changed?” He asked, looking over pointedly at Wei WuXian. He pressed his lips together, looking down.

There was a pregnant pause when nobody spoke. ZeWu-Jun was looking over them searchingly, in the end, his gaze settling on Lan SiZhui, who lowered his eyes, not wanting to be confronted with the other’s heavy gaze.

“I cannot claim to know what Sect Leader Jin means by this.” ZeWu-Jun said. “However, I know my disciples and I believe their morals and personality reflect what they learned from the Lan Sect. Trusting this, I’m inclined to agree that light offenses should be forgiven. However, since I don’t know the situation at all just yet, it is not my place to decide whether every action is forgivable. That nothing changed doesn’t excuse that these actions have been committed. Is that agreeable?”

“No.” Jin Ling huffed, but this didn’t sound defiant. “But I guess I cannot hope for better.” He also looked over at Lan SiZhui, who pressed his lips together, but inclined his head. He also agreed.

“In this case, we’re anxious to hear your tale.” Lan XiChen said.

“Ah, actually,” Wei WuXian unexpectedly spoke up, “before you begin, I have to ask you something.” Lan SiZhui looked up at this, furrowing his brows. Wei WuXian looked over them, then sighed. “Is Hudie here? Did you bring it? I told ZeWu-Jun to give you your possessions before you left.”

There was a pause, when the three of them said nothing, and most gazes settled on Lan SiZhui. However, he didn’t answer, looking down instead. To bring up Hudie already... Wei WuXian wouldn’t let them get away with this. Not that Lan SiZhui wanted to! There was no way not to tell them about all he did. But to be confronted by this already...

“I have them here.” Lan JingYi said after a while, reaching into his sleeve. Indeed, the qiankun pouch he received before they went into the Mingshi was in his hand. He opened it

and summoned several things from it. First was Xianzi, Jin Ling's practice sword. Jin Ling took it with a scowl.

"I'll have to see if my sword is in my rooms."

"We haven't found Suihua when we investigated." Lan XiChen also furrowed his brow. At this, Jin Ling's scowl deepened.

"I swear, if that person still has it...!"

"Are you actually implying you're angry your father has his own sword?" Lan JingYi asked. Jin Ling at this calmly raised Xianzi to be eye level with him.

"You're right. This sword is just fine to stab you with it!" He glared at the other. Lan JingYi snorted and summoned his Zhameng next. He grinned at his own sword, quickly placing it across his lap. Next was Yingjiu. Lan SiZhui hesitated before taking it, then placed it next to his hip on the ground. He didn't look up to see the others' reactions. Finally, Lan JingYi summoned another qiankun pouch from the one he held currently. Seeing it, Lan SiZhui felt his heart rate pick up and he was unable to look away from the unassuming bundle that held his spiritual tool. Lan JingYi clearly hesitated.

"I can summon it if you don't want to." Lan SiZhui offered, for some reason eager to interact with the tool. Lan JingYi pressed his lips together.

"In your state, you really shouldn't touch this thing." He said. Before this could get awkward, Wei WuXian got up and came over.

"It's fine. I can handle it."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes. Wei WuXian sighed, then took the pouch. After opening it, he took out Hudie. Lan SiZhui hadn't seen it since the battle in Nightless City, and he had to realize he missed his spiritual guqin. Seeing the evil-suppressing talismans applied to it, he felt a little indignant. There was also a strange tingle in his hand. He wanted to play it, see if the tool still responded to him. He felt its energy even through the talismans and spells. There was a certain aura around it. Was there something wrong?

However, he didn't get his answers. Seeing his gaze on the guqin, Wei WuXian quickly bagged it and tied the pouch to his sash.

"I'll keep it safe, alright?" Wei WuXian patted the pouch twice, which seemed to agitate the tool. Did Wei WuXian not realize this? Lan SiZhui didn't answer, frowning at him, and so, Wei WuXian soon returned to his own place. The seniors watched the scene in a puzzled silence.

"Hudie?" Hanguang-Jun murmured, looking first at Wei WuXian, then Lan SiZhui. He averted his gaze.

He always thought he would receive his spiritual guqin with Hanguang-Jun by his side and when he would name it, Lan WangJi would nod to him approvingly. Maybe even smile at

him. However, he received it in the middle of war instead, with a cold Young Master by his side and his enemy sitting across him, his leg useless after being broken twice.

“Young Master Wei, why does this guqin have several evil-suppressing talismans and spells cast onto it?” ZeWu-Jun asked confused.

“Ah, ZeWu-Jun...” Wei WuXian smiled at him tightly. “This is really not my story to tell.”

“Right.” Jin Ling huffed, staring at him angrily. As Lan JingYi said, Jin Ling liked to lead the narrative sometimes. Lan SiZhui had no issue with this. However, he suspected Jin Ling planned on brushing over the details of Lan SiZhui’s turn to demonic cultivation. With this action, Wei WuXian ensured this would be impossible.

“SiZhui, don’t be mad at me.” Wei WuXian told him instead of addressing Jin Ling’s angry gaze. “The truth is, we all know by now, how secrets can affect the world, especially something like this. Besides, it’s not like you wouldn’t have told them anyways.” He glanced at Hanguang-Jun. “You were raised an honest man.”

“It was still not your decision.” Jin Ling crossed his arms over his chest.

“What?” Jiang WanYin scoffed at him. “Were you going to leave a mysterious evil guqin out of your story? What else were you going to leave out? How you apparently became close with my parents and me so much you feel you have the right to speak to me like you just did?”

“I wasn’t going to leave out anything.” Jin Ling glared back. “But this is our lives and our story to share. If Lan SiZhui decided to share this in another way, I’d have given him the chance.”

“Your lives now, is it?” Jiang WanYin’s eyes widened. “You were gone for two years, and you suddenly think you have nobody to answer to?!”

“I’m a Sect Leader, who do I have to answer to?” Jin Ling glared him down. Jiang WanYin’s eyes narrowed and he worked his jaw in a furious motion.

“Ah, alright, let’s all calm down.” Lan JingYi placated. “Clearly, we have a long story to tell, so why don’t we start?”

“Fine.” Jin Ling huffed, then began to talk.

Their story went like [\*this\*](#).

## Tranquility Part 1

Grandmaster was petting his beard, once Lan JingYi and Jin Ling was done with their side of how they arrived to the past. Lan JingYi waited for the other to finish before he began their side of it, although this time around, Lan SiZhui didn't pay that much attention to the story, but at their audience instead, having lived through it himself, none of this was new to him. He watched as different emotions played over the features of their seniors and didn't know what to make of this. They were a long way from getting to the harder parts of the story to tell, but Lan SiZhui was already nervous. He was also paying close attention to Senior Wei. Hudie was still acting up, and Lan SiZhui couldn't understand how he didn't notice. However, the other was paying just as much attention to Lan JingYi and Jin Ling as the others, seemingly completely having forgot about the qiankun pouch on his belt.

They listened to Lan JingYi describing how they figured something might be wrong, watched the faces of his seniors as recognition passed through them when he told them about Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui staying out to talk to Hanguang-Jun, being taken in front of Grandmaster and ZeWu-Jun, about their punishment, then later how Jin Ling found them. Furrowing of brows when Lan JingYi told them about their plan to break into the Forbidden Room once again, how they discovered *Spring Again* held elements of the old Qin language. At this point, Grandmaster Lan seemed especially close to qi deviation.

Lan JingYi told them about how he was taken to Moling and here they had to break, to explain to Wei WuXian about Lan JingYi's origins. Once this was done, they returned to telling them how in the meantime Jin Ling and Wei WuXian spent their punishment together. This seemed to amuse Wei WuXian greatly, although he was the only one. Then, they told them about the Introduction Ceremony, and Lan SiZhui saw it on Grandmaster Lan's face, that even though this happened in a different time, a different world, he was still offended by the disrespect.

Lan JingYi explained them again, how he figured out they were in the past. They told their seniors about the punishment they received for disturbing the Introduction Ceremony, and here, Lan SiZhui, a little ashamed, told them about how he went to talk to ZeWu-Jun about his dilemma of helping the past or not. This earned a few raised eyebrows, but strangely, an approving nod from Grandmaster as well.

"Seeking out your seniors' advice is a wise thing to do." Lan QiRen praised when there was a lull in the story. Lan SiZhui thanked him quietly, explaining a little that at this point, the Lan XiChen of the past thought he told him this because they were sent back on purpose. ZeWu-Jun seemed thoughtful at that.

"I can see how my logic would've led me to this conclusion. Although, surely first I'd want to confirm this."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui agreed, telling him how ZeWu-Jun came to the library the next day, seeking out *Spring Again* and taking the *Collection of Time* with him. Here, Lan QiRen also gave an approving nod towards his nephew this time.

The three of them then spoke about how they debated helping out or not, spoke about noticing the differences between the past and the future. Then, reluctantly, they told their seniors about their plan to find the Yin Iron before Wen RuoHan could. Here, the seniors exchanged a look of consideration, but when they didn't reprimand them, they told the story a bit braver.

They told them how they wanted to explore the back mountains, finishing their punishment, attending to their classes, but also exploring. How this went on for weeks, how Jin Ling began to carry a bow around instead of his sword, which was now with his father. Jiang WanYin frowned at this, looking at Huangfeng with distaste. Since they haven't told them about how they discovered the spiritual nature of the bow yet, he must've found it offending that his nephew's only weapon at this time must've been this regular bow.

They told them how they found the barrier and figured there was a spell hiding the shard, they've tried to figure it out. About the night-hunt on Biling lake, about returning and how the barrier was disabled when Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian to stumbled upon it and took the Yin Iron shard on their own. About the notion to leave before the lectures were over, how they needed to figure out how to get into the Burial Mounds, crafting a talisman on their own.

This seemed to intrigue both Wei WuXian and Grandmaster, and they asked Lan JingYi to show it to them. Lan JingYi quickly drew the symbols, by now practiced in this, and explained to them how they combined a talisman and a ward, how it worked and the name for it as well.

"Ah, I think I've heard about this Graveyard-purging talisman before." Wei WuXian nodded. "I've heard, it is so powerful, when the Burial Mounds was still overrun by resentful ghosts, this could keep them away for a time."

"Mn." Lan JingYi nodded proudly. "Grandmaster... Of the past that is, also approved of it when we presented it in the Mingshi."

"And it has been tried before?" Lan QiRen stoked his beard.

"Yes! The Sect Leaders even used it when they came to the Burial Mounds."

"Why did they need to enter there?" ZeWu-Jun asked, confused. Lan JingYi paused, glancing at Lan SiZhui, then said:

"That was at a later time, we'll get to it." He said awkwardly. "The point is, they used it and it worked great!"

"Then, once life returns to normal, perhaps we can also integrate it into our own practices." Lan QiRen nodded approvingly. Lan JingYi beamed. "Now, since you've crafted this, how did you leave the GusuLan lectures, since XiChen and myself, by your own recount, seemed suspicious of you three?"

Here came an awkward silence again, then Lan JingYi, also awkwardly, told them about the letter they crafted and how they left to go to YiLing. This earned several disapproving looks

from their seniors, but thankfully, they didn't make a big deal out of it. Just as well, there was a lot more coming they could disapprove of.

They told them about how the Graveyard-Purging talisman worked, about Lan SiZhui's inquiry of the spirit, about meeting Xiao XingChen, going to the Dafan Mountain, finding the shard gone. Then they went to Qinghe where they met Lan WangJi and the two Lan returned to Cloud Recesses. From here, the story was harder to tell. About how they fought, sent Lan JingYi away, faced Wen Xu, were brought to Qishan, questioned, then brought to the indoctrination. Lan SiZhui chanced a look up then, seeing his seniors across them sitting with grim expressions, looking like they were also remembering those times. Hudie was also emitting a stronger aura before, and as there was a pause, Lan SiZhui considered asking Wei WuXian to summon it, so he could settle the tool. However, then he was prompted to continue, and he didn't have the chance.

Lan SiZhui told them how he told Wen Chao the last shard was in the Burial Mounds, then he told them about the night-hunt nearby and the Xuanwu cave.

Here, he stopped talking, suddenly something coming to mind. Lan SiZhui in the past found Feixu, his family sword in the Xuanwu cave during this night-hunt. In the past, Feixu was lost at one point after they fought the Jin in the Wen village. Lan SiZhui always assumed the sword was left there and because of that, he had the illusion that would Wen Yuan want to take up the path of the sword, Wen Ning would be able to give it to him. He hoped so, at least. In this time, was Feixu still in the cave? Forgotten and lying on the ground amongst other people's weapons?

"SiZhui?" Wei WuXian prompted him to speak, and Lan SiZhui looked up, taking in a sharp breath. Wei WuXian and his two friends all looked at him with caution, the others worry. Of course, those who were also in the past, knew about Lan SiZhui's issue with resentful energy. He ignored their looks for now, continuing.

He told them about how they got out via Lan SiZhui finding a Wen sword, using it to find the second exit. Told them about escaping while Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi stayed behind, about how Jiang Cheng almost died trying to go back for his brother. About Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan going back to Lanling to bring help, freeing the two others.

"Is this really how it went?" Wei WuXian asked, looking over at his brother. "Jiang Cheng, when we stayed behind with Lan Zhan, back then, did you really almost drown, trying to get back to us? Or was that just because of the changes these guys made?"

"What changes?" Jiang WanYin asked, hitting the table, but not looking at Wei WuXian. He was clenching his jaw in anger it seemed.

"So, is this how it was?" Wei WuXian asked with wide eyes. Jiang WanYin didn't answer this, and eventually, ZeWu-Jun prompted them again to continue.

Then, he told them about the reclaiming of Cloud Recesses. Here, he also stopped several times. He told them they stopped in Moling to regroup first, told them Su MuShi gave them three dozen disciples, and also had their spiritual guqin made. Lan WangJi looked over at Wei WuXian then, asking:



“Hudie?”

Wei WuXian was quiet at this, looking at Lan SiZhui, who was looking back at him.

“Lan SiZhui.” Jin Ling warned lowly, also gripping his bow, the wood creaking under his hand. Lan SiZhui didn’t even know what Jin Ling was warning him against, but he looked away from Wei WuXian. Jin Ling was looking at him with a questioning look.

Tension was high. Did his friends expect him to attack, just to get Hudie back? He knew he shouldn’t. He knew Hudie was tainted with the resentful energy of the Yin Iron. He wouldn’t want it back, of course... Still, there was the feeling of wanting to take it back, settle the resentful energy, claim the tool as his again. His fingers tingled still.

“SiZhui.” Hanguang-Jun’s unexpected voice called out and Lan SiZhui looked up, seeing him eying Wei WuXian before turning to Lan SiZhui. He looked at him questioningly. Did he want to see Hudie? Know why it was bound with several evil-suppressing talismans? Lan SiZhui shook his head, cleared his throat and continued the story.

From here, he told them about the fight, about freeing the disciples and ending the Wen’s reign in Cloud Recesses with minimal losses. He then gave word over to Jin Ling, standing. Since the charm was activated, it would be effective in the close proximity of the reception hall, and so Lan SiZhui could go out and get some fresh air without risking breaking the spell, staying in hearing range as well, while still being able to remove himself from the situation. He heard Jin Ling stutter in his speech as Lan SiZhui stopped outside the door, but then he continued.

Lan SiZhui watched as some paces away disciples were attending their duties. He watched them with longing, since it had been such a long time ago that he had such a normal routine as these brothers. With the Sunshot Campaign and Cloud Recesses burning, getting used to half-finished buildings and construction materials all around, Lan SiZhui reveled in how normal Cloud Recesses looked now. It was just how he remembered growing up here.

He listened as Jin Ling told their seniors about the fight in Lotus Pier, about discovering a new power, how they fought the Wen Sect. Once he got to the part where they saved Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu, there was a gasp behind him and Lan SiZhui glanced back, seeing Jiang WanYin staring at his nephew with wide eyes, then turning to his brother with a sharp glare. He didn’t cut in, but his hands were gripping the sides of the table he was seated at.

Jin Ling spoke about going to YiLing with an injured Jiang FengMian, and how he met Lan SiZhui there, and how they went to the Wen supervisory office. Once he reached this part, however, Jiang WanYin spoke up.

“Where were *we* during this time?” He asked sharply.

“Well, Wei WuXian told us you – Young Master Jiang, that is – went back, once you could escape Zidian’s clutches.” Jin Ling said with a frown. “Then when Young Master Jiang and Wei WuXian found that the Wen were looking for Madam Yu and Jiang FengMian but couldn’t find them, they went back to Meishan, where Madam Yu originally sent them, hoping that their seniors also went there.”

“So, we didn’t meet the Wen there, in YiLing at all?” Jiang WanYin asked intently.

“If you’re asking what I think you’re asking, just ask it.” Jin Ling clicked his tongue. At this, Jiang WanYin looked mad for some reason. Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “No, you didn’t meet the Wen. As far as I’m aware, Young Master Jiang never even fought Core-Melting Hand! SiZhui?”

“Hm?” He asked, a little startled to have been addressed, even though Jin Ling didn’t even look at him.

“Did Wen ZhuLiu ever mention Young Master Jiang to you at all?” This caught Lan SiZhui by surprise. These events in YiLing... Lan SiZhui remembered that back then, Jin Ling was constantly acting strange. He didn’t know why back then, and now, too. It seemed this had something to do with Jiang WanYin and Wen ZhuLiu, but he couldn’t imagine what.

“Not that I remember.” Lan SiZhui shook his head, recalling his conversations with the Core-Melting Hand. Although, back then, they rarely spoke of other people, rather speaking of their own experiences and Lan SiZhui’s family.

“Why are you asking him?” Jiang WanYin frowned, looking towards Lan SiZhui.

“We haven’t gotten to that part yet. But Lan SiZhui really likes to chat with the enemy while in the middle of battle.” Lan SiZhui huffed, turning away.

“I told you I was trying to buy us time.”

“Buy us time by fighting!” Jin Ling clicked his tongue. “Must you befriend every person you meet?!”

“He didn’t befriend Wen Chao. Instead, he beheaded him!” Lan JingYi laughed.

“Hey!” Jin Ling argued. “I killed Wen Chao!”

“Ah, right! We still don’t know if your father truly borrowed you his sword, or if you just took it without asking.”

“I said already, I borrowed it!” Jin Ling hissed.

“MouShi, who believes you? We all know you took it without asking.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“What are you talking about?” Jiang WanYin scoffed. At this, Jin Ling and Lan JingYi ceased their bickering and returned to telling their story.

Lan SiZhui knew what was coming up, so he remained where he was, rooted to the spot, not wanting to return and explain what happened. He listened as Jin Ling told them about staying with the Wen to heal, about Huangfeng as well. He was grateful for this interlude, for as soon as it was revealed how Huangfeng could channel spiritual energy, their seniors also wanted to see this weapon.

“Spiritual bow?” Jiang WanYin asked skeptically. “I’ve never heard of such thing.”

“Ah, Jiang Cheng, it is quite remarkable!” Wei WuXian said excitedly. “Although I only saw it work a few times, it was really impressive!”

“Sect Leader Jin, if you don’t mind, may we see how it works?” ZeWu-Jun requested softly. Jin Ling huffed, picked up his bow and stood, going over to the middle of the room. He took a look around.

“Sect Leader Lan, sorry in advance.” He said. The seniors didn’t seem to understand, then Jin Ling aimed Huangfeng at one of the empty tables. He drew the string without an arrow, then shot, yellow spiritual energy releasing with the string, a concentrated shot at the table. It worked like a sword glare would, and the table was destroyed in an instant.

“A-Ling!” Jiang WanYin jumped on his feet, staring at the table in disbelief. All their seniors, except Wei WuXian who was familiar with the weapon, seemed impressed by the display. Jin Ling turned to ZeWu-Jun and inclined his head in apology.

“Interesting.” Grandmaster Lan stroked his beard. “May I examine it?”

“It doesn’t work for others.” Jin Ling said, even as he handed it over.

“Ah, that’s not quite true.” Lan JingYi said. Jin Ling looked over questioningly.

“In the cave when we confronted Su MinShan, Jin ZiXuan also used it.” Lan SiZhui said. Jin Ling pursed his lips and nodded.

“Yes, I remember. I didn’t think it would, I just acted on instinct.”

“Are you sure it only works for you?” Wei WuXian asked. Jin Ling shrugged.

“You’re free to try, but in the past, nobody but me was able to draw spiritual energy from it – well, me and my father, I guess.” At this, Wei WuXian grinned and jumped on his feet, going over to the Grandmaster. He handed over the weapon with a warning look. Wei WuXian bowed to him with a grin as he took it, then he drew and aimed it at one of the other tables. However, when he drew, then released the string, nothing happened. He tried again and again, but still it didn’t work.

“Give it here.” Jiang WanYin said, annoyed. “You must be doing it wrong.”

“I’m not doing it wrong!” Wei WuXian protested, but he still handed it over. “Unless there’s a technique to it Jin Ling isn’t sharing with us!”

“There’s no technique.” Jin Ling shrugged. “You just channel your spiritual energy into it. It isn’t different than using your sword.” He frowned. “My father was able to use it, and the weapons master of Cloud Recesses also examined it, to understand better how it works. We haven’t gotten to the solution before we left. I figured Jin ZiXuan could use it because we were in a battle situation.” He explained

Jiang WanYin also tried, but he failed as well, even after multiple tries. Frustrated, he handed it back to Jin Ling, who then went back to his place.

“I suspect the reason nobody else can use it is the same why others can’t use a person’s sword.” Grandmaster Lan said. “This is your primary spiritual tool. It recognizes your spiritual energy and like a sword, only allows its master to use it effectively. Naturally, since Jin ZiXuan was your father, when he used it, he was also able to channel spiritual energy into it.” He looked at the bow on Jin Ling’s table with an approving and interested expression. How did Jin Ling describe in the past, when Lan QiRen examined his bow while Lan SiZhui was in the Burial Mounds? ‘Like he was looking at a perfectly copied volume of the Lan rules’? “Remarkable.”

“Thanks.” Jin Ling nodded.

“It’s name is Huangfeng?” Jiang WanYin asked with a frown. Jin Ling shrugged.

“I didn’t name it. This is what people called it during the Sunshot Campaign.”

“Indeed!” Lan JingYi grinned. “While I was in hiding, people would speak of a new, deadly spiritual tool. It had the speed and deadliness of a wasp. Everyone would underestimate this weapon, but just like the size of a bug, the sting will kill you, not the size or shape of it. Not once have people mentioned, all you see is a flash of yellow spiritual glare and the next moment thirty Wen soldiers fall! This is the legend of Huangfeng, one of the deadliest spiritual weapon of all, wielded by MouShi, whose tongue is just as sharp and deadly as his spiritual tool.”

“Ah, wasn’t it ten wen soldiers last time?” Jin Ling scoffed. “Even that was an overstatement, how did you get to thirty?!”

“It wasn’t me!” Lan JingYi protested. “Those rumors started before the Sunshot Campaign. But once we took the supervisory offices, people began to spin such tales. You should be grateful, I managed to convince them not to say you could kill an army with it.”

“Ridiculous.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “And to think they even include that awful nickname!” He shook his head.

“Anyhow, back to your story.” Jiang WanYin scoffed, shaking his head. Jin Ling sighed and continued, so Lan SiZhui turned away, not wanting to contribute to this part of their story.

“So, as I said, we were practicing when Lady Wen appeared on the practice field and informed us that Wen Chao had arrived to YiLing. Knowing he was looking for us, naturally, we couldn’t stay there. We went back to the supervisory office and collected Madam Yu and Sect Leader Jiang. The problem was, since Wen Chao was looking for us, we couldn’t show together like this. Lady Wen arranged a boat for us, and we planned on going to Meishan as was the original destination. However, in order to get there, we had to go through YiLing. During the carriage ride, we decided to split up. I would take Sect Leader Jiang to the boat, and Madam Yu would come separately, just like Lan SiZhui. Since we were all in disguises, we were not trying to be discreet, but we didn’t want to show together regardless.

“Me and Sect Leader Jiang made it safely to the boat without much issue. However, then Madam Yu also came. We were only waiting for SiZhui to show. Previously, we established that Lan SiZhui’s face was too well-known, that’s why we agreed he go separately. We also agreed to wait for everyone to arrive until midnight. Would one of us not arrive, the others go to Meishan, the others follow later. If anyone gets captured, they send a message or otherwise signal their capture, and we go back for them.

“This was the plan. Madam Yu, once she arrived, tried to convince us to go without waiting for Lan SiZhui, but knowing she just didn’t like him, I refused and waited until midnight. However, no message came and nothing signaled he was in trouble. Once it was midnight, we left. I waited in Meishan for Lan SiZhui to turn up, only he didn’t.” Here, he stopped. The silence stretched. Lan SiZhui was nervous about this part. He didn’t really want to talk about the Burial Mounds, and he also sensed Hudie even stronger now – as if the guqin was responding to his state of turmoil.

“SiZhui?” Came the gentle voice of ZeWu-Jun’s behind him. Lan SiZhui looked up at the sky.

“It’s lunch hour.” He said softly, turning back. “We should take a break.”

The seniors exchanged a look, except Wei WuXian, who looked at him with an unreadable expression. Lan SiZhui looked back at him, his gaze wandering to the qiankun pouch. However, then Wei WuXian placed a hand on top of it and this made Lan SiZhui turn away.

“Alright.” ZeWu-Jun agreed eventually. At this, Lan JingYi and Jin Ling stood and bowed to them, going over to Lan SiZhui.

“We’ll take lunch in SiZhui’s room.” Lan JingYi said.

“Be back in an hour.” ZeWu-Jun requested. They nodded then headed to the mass hall to get lunch. They didn’t speak much until they reached Lan SiZhui’s rooms, where Lan JingYi activated a silencing charm as soon as they entered.

“SiZhui, you can’t not tell them.” He said right away. Lan SiZhui sighed and sat at his table.

“I don’t really have much choice with Wei WuXian’s scheme. Let’s just eat.” He requested. The others shared a look, but then also sat and began to eat. Once they were done, Lan SiZhui served tea.

“What are you planning on saying then?” Jin Ling asked.

“The truth, of course!” Lan JingYi said. “I told them about how I broke into the Forbidden Room, but they didn’t seem mad. Surely, they’ll forgive you for this as well?”

“Committing a domestic crime and using a forbidden technique the whole cultivation world is against are quite on different scales, JingYi.” Jin Ling scoffed. “Naturally, SiZhui is reluctant.”

“Well, he will have to tell them.” Lan JingYi argued. “Wei WuXian already knows you use demonic cultivation, he even knows you have half of the Stygian Tiger Amulet. He even took Hudie. There’s no way we can tell the rest without mentioning it. I have a feeling Wei WuXian wouldn’t let us get away with it either.”

“I know.” Lan SiZhui said.

“Then what’s the issue?” Lan JingYi frowned.

“It’s not that.” Lan SiZhui said quietly. “But it’s not easy to talk about.”

“Ah, but surely, Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun hardly have an issue with Wei WuXian’s cultivation methods and even Jiang WanYin didn’t condemn him for it. Besides, it’s not like you had a choice! Wen ZhuLiu injured you, if you didn’t turn to this method, would you be still alive?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Lan SiZhui told him, standing. “I knew better. I still did it.” He said, but seeing Lan JingYi didn’t understand, he shook his head. “I’m going to the Cold Springs to meditate a little.” With this, he left his rooms and Lan JingYi and Jin Ling inside. He still heard Lan JingYi call out:

“ZeWu-Jun said an hour!” But he didn’t respond.

He really went to the Cold Spring to meditate. Upon arriving, he was grateful to find this spot empty of others. He stripped and went inside, soaking in the freezing water of the mountain lake. It soothed his aching wounds and his soul as well. He didn’t want to be late, so he tried to stay aware of his surroundings, but he must’ve failed, because he startled badly when someone behind him called out his name.

Turning around, he saw Hanguang-Jun standing on the shore, his eyes wide, his brows furrowed. Lan SiZhui blinked at him.

“Ah, Hanguang-Jun, sorry. I must’ve lost track of time. Is it time to go back already?”

“SiZhui.” Hanguang-Jun swallowed, his eyes around Lan SiZhui’s chest. He looked troubled. “What happened to your back?”

“My back?” Lan SiZhui asked. Then, he realized he was with his back to Hanguang-Jun when the other arrived and his eyes widened. He then realized why Hanguang-Jun was staring at his chest as well. He didn’t intend anyone to ever see his scars, much less someone like Hanguang-Jun! “Ah, this is—” He cut himself off, not knowing how to finish.

“Dress.” Hanguang-Jun ordered after a beat of thinking. Lan SiZhui didn’t want to defy him, so he went and dressed quickly. He barely fished pulling on his boots when Hanguang-Jun turned and with a brisk pace began to head towards the compound. Lan SiZhui hurried to catch up.

“Ah, Hanguang-Jun, it’s nothing.” He said, trying to make light of the situation. Hanguang-Jun didn’t answer, and Lan SiZhui didn’t know what else to say. However, instead of towards

the Reception Hall as Lan SiZhui expected, Hanguang-Jun turned towards a different part of the Cloud Recesses instead. Lan SiZhui halted, hesitating. "Aren't we going back?" Hanguang-Jun stopped then, turned and glared at Lan SiZhui.

"Come." He said in a voice that booked no argument. Lan SiZhui glanced towards the Reception Hall one more time, then followed Hanguang-Jun.

"Where are we going?" He asked. Hanguang-Jun didn't answer. Lan SiZhui followed him until they arrived in front of a series of buildings, but there, he halted. "Hanguang-Jun..." He frowned. Hanguang-Jun stopped once again, looking back at him. "This is truly unnecessary."

"Not unnecessary." Hanguang-Jun stated.

"It really is." Lan SiZhui shook his head. "Besides, these are... Ah, they're from the discipline whip, what could the healers do for it?" He asked, looking over at the infirmary.

"SiZhui." Hanguang-Jun pulled his attention back to himself. "Come." He said, then turned and walked inside. Lan SiZhui hesitated, then sighed. He could not say no to his senior, as much as he wanted. He might not be part of the Lan Sect anymore, but Hanguang-Jun was Hanguang-Jun. Inside, Hanguang-Jun greeted the healer attending, requesting their aid. The healer, Han ShiYu was at the ready, bowing to Hanguang-Jun, then leading them to a private room.

"Hanguang-Jun, what can this one help with?" She inquired.

"SiZhui." Hanguang-Jun addressed him, making a gesture. Did he want him to explain? Lan SiZhui sighed.

"Madam Han." He bowed as much as he could. "Hanguang-Jun brought me here because he's worried. It's really nothing."

"Let me determine that, SiZhui." Madam Han told him. She had been the healer since Lan SiZhui was a child, so they knew each other fairly well. She now turned to Hanguang-Jun. "Hanguang-Jun, please, go and wait outside while I talk to SiZhui."

"Mn." Hanguang-Jun nodded. "I'll inform the others we will be late."

"That's really—" At Hanguang-Jun's look, Lan SiZhui cut himself off and sighed, tired. Hanguang-Jun didn't know this was a deserved punishment, naturally, he was worried. He wasn't the person who he got used to in the past, the cold Young Master, but his caretaker instead. While he was never overly affectionate, Hanguang-Jun always held Lan SiZhui's health above other things. Back then, when they just brought back the sword spirit from the Mo manor and Lan SiZhui was injured while trying to settle the spirit, after archiving just that with Senior Wei, Hanguang-Jun ordered him to the healers as well. He then came, ignoring Grandmaster, who was treated a bed over from Lan SiZhui and transferred Lan SiZhui spiritual energy to heal him instead. Only when ZeWu-Jun appeared to check on things, did he go over to check on Grandmaster. Knowing his personality, Lan SiZhui knew he could do nothing but agree, so he nodded. "Thanks, Hanguang-Jun."

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun with this left the room. Lan SiZhui turned back to Madam Han.

“It’s really—”

“Save it, SiZhui. Just tell me or show me.” She told him with a reproaching look. “You’re not a child anymore, Hanguang-Jun knows better than to worry about little things. If he brought you here personally, he has good reason.”

Lan SiZhui sighed, giving in. There was no swaying the healer either. Healer Han was a good person, she cared for her patients. She was also not once on the receiving end of Hanguang-Jun’s agitation when Lan SiZhui was injured, and so she really took these things seriously.

“I received twenty-five strikes with the discipline whip about six months ago.” He said quietly, not looking up. “It’s fine. I didn’t have a fever in weeks and—”

“SiZhui.” She said sharply and Lan SiZhui looked up, surprised by the tone. Madam Han was looking at him with pity. “You are not a healer. I’ll determine if it’s fine or not. Please strip and show me.”

“I really—”

“SiZhui.” Madam Han repeated. Lan SiZhui sighed, then shrugged out of his still damp clothes. Seeing his chest, Madam Han’s eyebrows furrowed. “And this?” She asked. Her eyes narrowed. “Is that the Jin Sects’—”

“It doesn’t even hurt that much anymore.” Lan SiZhui argued.

“Mn.” She hummed, stepping closer and probing at the burn gently. “It seems to have healed well. Not completely, that is still some time away. Although with your spiritual powers...” She trailed off, frowning. Then, she said: “Now, turn around.”

Lan SiZhui huffed but did as told. At the sight of his back he expected an extreme reaction. However, she just sighed softly, as if disappointed and Lan SiZhui tensed – even the healer was disappointed in him. However, the next moment, she contradicted this theory as she began to root around the space, all the while speaking.

“You know about your adoptive father’s scars, don’t you?” Lan SiZhui hummed in confirmation. “Lan WangJi received thirty-three lashes with the discipline whip once. This was around the time Young Master Wei died. He received this punishment because he fought thirty-three of his peers from the Lan Sect.”

“I didn’t know.” Lan SiZhui frowned, shivering a little without his top on. Madam Han soon returned and began to apply ointment on his back. She was gentle, not agitating the wounds. “Why?”

“Nobody knows.” She said nonchalantly. “Well, I suspect those closest to him, his brother, maybe Grandmaster as well, know. The rest of us are left in speculation. There used to be a rumor going around the Cloud Recesses, about this. They speculated Second Young Master



Lan received this punishment because he fought to protect someone who was very important to him.”

“Who?” Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

“The rumors say, the mother of his child.” She hummed thoughtfully. “Naturally, you’re not his blood relative. But it is a good story to tell, even if it’s not true.”

“Madam Han, if you don’t think the rumors are true...” Lan SiZhui trailed off.

“Why did I tell you this?” She hummed. “Because a girl likes a romantic story.” She chuckled. “And because you looked afraid Hanguang-Jun would judge you. This, you never have to fear. He bears scars just like yours... Well, maybe not quite the same.”

“Hm?” Lan SiZhui hummed, confused.

“These look like you’ve been pulled around on gravel at one point. You didn’t fight like this, did you?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui said, not confirming, nor denying. She sighed softly, then laid a soft cloth over his back, then took some bandages and secured it to his back, while being mindful of his front as well. Once she was done, she allowed him to dress, and Lan SiZhui found that despite his protests, he really did feel much better.

“So, you say this was six months ago?” She asked then.

“Around, yes.” Lan SiZhui confirmed, thinking he was done here, however, Madam Han wasn’t done with him just yet. She took him off guard by grabbing his hand and pulling up his sleeve, pressing her fingers gently against Lan SiZhui’s wrist while her other hand moved around his forearm. Examining his meridians, Lan SiZhui realized, and wanted to pull away. She held him strongly, however, frowning. Lan SiZhui looked down, knowing what she found.

It wasn’t quite a full year yet that Wen ZhuLiu attacked him in the Nightless City and crushed his meridians. Although the healers in the past and Wen Qing as well estimated this would take a year to regain his spiritual powers, healing meridians required to have qi regularly circulated in one’s body. Since Lan SiZhui relied so heavily on demonic cultivation, he didn’t do this. Also, Wen Qing assessed that his Core and meridians were contaminated by resentful energy, which would certainly slow the healing process.

“As you know, these scars take a while to heal.” She told him as she let go of him without indicating anything about what she found, and went around the room and prepared something in a bowl. “Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Thank you.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“However, the state of your meridians and Core is more worrying.” Lan SiZhui sighed softly and Madam Han threw him a look. “I don’t know how long you’ve been practicing demonic cultivation, but without taking good care of your spiritual veins, it caused a lot of damage in

you. Going untreated, it could easily kill you. You're close to qi deviation right now as it is. This cannot be left like this."

"Madam Han, this is—"

"I'm not looking for an explanation. I'm telling you as your doctor that this needs to be addressed."

"I'm aware of the danger."

"I highly doubt that, because even I don't know enough about this to address it." She returned to him, handing over a bowl of something. "Medicine to cleanse and to starve off infections to your back." Lan SiZhui took it and drank it. Once he was done, Madam Han took the bowl and put it away, while continuing to speak:

"I will need to read after Golden Cores to figure out if the damage caused by the resentful energy can be reversed. At lower levels, as you know, it can be purged by meditating and cultivating in a natural positive energy outcrop; however, that is for lower levels of resentful energy than what contaminated you. I'm afraid in your case, while it would certainly help, it wouldn't get rid of it entirely. Left unaddressed, the resentful energy would act like it does in every cultivator who is unfortunate enough to encounter resentful energy in their Core. The resentful energy would constantly attack your healthy spiritual energy, the pain this causes would make you go crazy, not even mentioning the negative effects resentful energy has on the mind, and with time, you would be killed by this."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, he knew this. Wen Qing told him Wen RuoHan was dying because of this. He didn't have illusions to be different than Wen RuoHan had been. He just didn't feel the effects because of his already crushed meridians.

"Here." She handed over a pill she pulled from a jar. "This will help settle your qi a little bit. I don't know what you all are doing in the Reception Hall since this morning, but it brought you close to a qi deviation. I'll speak with Sect Leader and advice you delay this to another day, when resentful energy isn't so strong."

"That's really not necessary." Lan SiZhui shook his head.

"I'll determine this. You're free to go now, but I expect you back here once everything about your disappearance and return had been settled." Lan SiZhui blinked, surprised by this. Surely, he was also gone for two years, but... "Don't look so surprised." Madam Han huffed. "Everyone had been missing you. Our head disciple had gone missing, do you think people didn't notice? Sect Leader Jin wasn't the only one whose absence was important. You and Lan JingYi are part of our Sect, you're our juniors and seniors. When people realized you've gone missing, they were distraught. Everyone was helpful and put a lot of effort into their work, so ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun can concentrate on bringing you back and not have to worry about the Sect."

Lan SiZhui was touched by this and he bowed to Madam Han in gratitude. She patted his hands as she passed, then led him outside the room. There, two people were waiting.

“SiZhui!” Lan JingYi hurried over right away, looking him over. “Are you okay?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded, surprised by their presence. “Why did you come?” He asked, glancing over at ZeWu-Jun as well.

“Of course I came!” Lan JingYi frowned at him. “Why didn’t you tell us you were so severely injured? Jin Ling suspected you have been whipped, but Hanguang-Jun said... Several whip marks? Just what the fuck did Jin GuangShan do to you?!”

“JingYi.” He reprimanded softly, glancing pointedly at ZeWu-Jun.

“SiZhui.” ZeWu-Jun stepped closer then. “WangJi said he saw several whip marks on your back. He demanded to know what happened, but the others refused to say, saying we wouldn’t understand just yet. However, Sect Leader Jin told us you were kept in bad conditions. If you were in pain, why didn’t you ask for a healer sooner? We would’ve understood.”

“It’s not my place to ask for anything from the Lan Sect anymore.” Lan SiZhui shrugged and felt relieved this didn’t agitate his wounds as badly as it had before. ZeWu-Jun’s eyebrows furrowed and he opened his mouth to ask, but Lan SiZhui sighed, shaking his head. “Why don’t we go back and continue? Once we tell you everything, you’ll understand.”

“Shouldn’t you rest first?” ZeWu-Jun asked, glancing over at Madam Han as well.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I was about to advise you to delay this for a later day. Lan SiZhui’s qi is instable.”

“Why?” ZeWu-Jun asked, frowning.

“It’s fine.” Lan SiZhui insisted. “We can continue.”

“SiZhui, Madam Han advises against this. I don’t want to cause harm.”

“You’re not.” Lan SiZhui huffed, then stepped back to bow both of them. “ZeWu-Jun, Madam Han, I’m really grateful for your concern, however, the more we delay this, the more nervous I’ll be about it. Wouldn’t it be better to get through this for once, and I can finally rest with an easy mind?” He asked, looking over at Madam Han. There was a pause, then she huffed.

“It is true, that strong emotions don’t improve his condition. If you feel this strongly about this, I cannot deny with good conscience. However, I cannot let you go without a warning either. Sect Leader, SiZhui’s qi is unstable. Whenever you see him getting overly emotional, please bring him back.”

“Mn.” ZeWu-Jun nodded with wide eyes, clearly wanting to know the reason for this. However, he must’ve known they would just evade the question until the discussion, he didn’t protest. “Then let us go back.” ZeWu-Jun sighed, then thanked Madam Han for her help. The three of them then departed and headed back to the Reception Hall. On their way back, from the opposite direction, from towards the gates, they saw Jin Ling and Jiang

WanYin also walking back towards the Reception Hall. Upon seeing them, the two halted and waited for them to also arrive in front of the Hall.

“Well?” Jin Ling asked, looking Lan SiZhui up and down. “You look better. Finally not slouching like a slob.”

“You’re so sensitive.” Lan JingYi rolled his eyes.

“I feel better.” Lan SiZhui nodded.

“Where have you been?” Lan JingYi asked with a frown.

“Uncle told me he took Fairy to Lotus Pier, once it became evident I wouldn’t return.” Jin Ling said. “I wanted to see her, so we went outside the gates so I could summon her.”

“Ah, your dog...” Lan JingYi frowned.

“What? She can kill you, you know.”

“As she almost did!” Lan JingYi agreed enthusiastically. “If you didn’t try to summon her, we wouldn’t have gotten into this mess in the first place. Because of her, all three of us almost died multiple times over the years!”

“You’re the one to talk?!” Jin Ling glared. “If not for your stupid troublemaking, we wouldn’t —”

“Enough.” Lan SiZhui snapped, having had enough of this argument for a lifetime. Lan JingYi looked away and Jin Ling huffed, although Jiang WanYin and ZeWu-Jun looked at him strangely. “Should we go inside?” Lan SiZhui gestured. After a moment of hesitation, ZeWu-Jun nodded and headed inside, followed by the rest of them. ZeWu-Jun went over and exchanged a quick, quiet word with Hanguang-Jun and Grandmaster.

“Ah, SiZhui!” Wei WuXian jumped on his feet as soon as they entered, waving at him as if they weren’t in the same room. “How are you?”

“I’m fine.” Lan SiZhui told him, already tired of saying this all the time, then bowed to his seniors, before going over and sitting with Jin Ling and Lan JingYi. Once they were seated, Lan SiZhui waited until the ward was put up, then without prompting, began to talk, not looking at any of their seniors.

He told them about trying to hide from the Wen, meeting Wen Chao at the market. He talked about facing Wen ZhuLiu and Wen Chao bringing out Wen Ning to threaten him. He told them he was tossed into the Burial Mounds to find the Yin Iron shard for Wen Chao, but he refused to go into detail. He told them he got out of the Burial Mounds using musical cultivation, which earned wondering looks when he chanced a glance up, but he wasn’t interrupted. Then, he told them about meeting Wei WuXian, about meeting Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu later and capturing them. Then, he stopped talking and without prompting, Jin Ling also told them what happened to him.

Going to Meishan, being denied to look for Lan SiZhui. Sending word to Cloud Recesses, only to receive Lan WangJi's arrival in reply. Then, about how he was denied once again by Madam Yu, and how she, then called him MouShi.

"It's not even a title." Jiang WanYin frowned. "Why do people call you that then?"

"Right?!" Jin Ling emphasized.

"Ah, but isn't this a compliment instead?" Wei WuXian asked. Jin Ling frowned at him, almost a mirror image of Jiang WanYin, who was also looking at his brother with a scowl. "Ah, Jiang Cheng, you'd understand if you heard them talk to each other! Madam Yu, she really respected you, Jin Ling!"

"Respected me?" Jin Ling scoffed. "I hardly think so!"

"Sure." Lan JingYi nodded. "Ah, didn't you say, Jin Ling, that once you called her an idiot to her face?"

"You did what?!" Jiang WanYin glared at his nephew, who made a careless gesture.

"She was being one! We were in YiLing already, Doctor Wen only a short walk away, yet she still wanted to take the injured Sect Leader Jiang to Meishan. What idiot does that, deny immediate medical care for someone who needs it, just because they're stubborn?"

"A-Ling!" Jiang WanYin glared at him.

"She called me much worse things and kept insulting Lan SiZhui!" Jin Ling defended.

"Once we return, you're going to kneel in the ancestor hall for a week, begging for forgiveness!" Jiang WanYin seethed. Jin Ling rolled his eyes, but didn't protest. Instead, he continued.

He told them how, after this, they went back to the Cloud Recesses to begin a war council. Then he told them about the reclaiming of Lotus Pier, then the raid of the indoctrination office for their swords, meeting Jin ZiXuan there. Here, Lan JingYi took over and managed to tell them about hiding with Lan XiChen. ZeWu-Jun seemed mildly surprised by the things he said but listened attentively. Lan JingYi told them how they met Meng Yao and how he warned Lan XiChen against trusting him, only to find out Lan XiChen by then knew their secret.

"Ah, ZeWu-Jun, did you really hide near Qishan at the time?" Wei WuXian asked curiously. ZeWu-Jun pressed his lips together and inclined his head.

"I figured hiding in plain sight was the best tactic." He admitted. "Although, would I not have met..." He trailed off, paling a little. "I would have returned sooner." He finished quietly.

"It's a good thing you didn't." Lan JingYi shrugged. At this, several people looked over at him curiously, but he didn't elaborate. Instead, he continued.

He told them about hearing rumors, then traveling to Lanling and recruiting Jin ZiXuan. About returning to Cloud Recesses and then joining the search for Lan SiZhui, only to discover him in the woods near YiLing with Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu as their prisoners. Then they told the seniors about going to Lotus Pier and then going to Cloud Recesses to continue war council.

Lan SiZhui told them about questioning Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu, then about the beginning of the Sunshot Campaign, how they had to wait to go to YiLing to save Wen Qing and Wen Ning. Then, eventually, they told them about the battle in YiLing. They told them about the fight and about being joined by Jin ZiXuan, Jin Ling even told them how Lan SiZhui chatted with General Wu before he was arrested. They told them about freeing the Wen siblings and taking them back to the camp. They talked about how the war council then arrived and the Sunshot Campaign continued, not before the Wen siblings returned to Dafan Mountain of course.

Then they got to the Sunshot Campaign in earnest. Jin Ling talked about their tactics, and all their seniors seemed to be impressed by this. Lan JingYi then told them about the first battle inside QishanWen territory, although he painted the first few battles as a poet would sing songs about the beauty of the mountains, but this didn't seem to bother their seniors.

"Ah, during this is when Lan SiZhui gained his title as well." Lan JingYi said with a small smile gracing his lips. Lan SiZhui sighed. By the end of their stay, his title, which he earned during the Sunshot Campaign, that people wrote poems around, was something disgraced and an insult. However, the others didn't know that yet. Wei WuXian did, but he also looked very interested.

"Ah, JingYi, tell us!" He prompted. "I've wondered about this!"

"Mn. The way Song Su told it was this: 'They say there is a disciple from the Lan Sect, who is elegant and gentle. He is delicate but strong. He plays a dark guqin with the tassels white and red. When the strings sound up, spring rain comes down and washes away the evil of the Wen Sect. This Lan disciple is himself the spring rain, bringing peace and chaos into the world at the same time. They don't know who it is, but they call him ChunYu-Jun.'"

"Ah, JingYi!" Wei WuXian beamed. "That's really nice indeed!"

"Mn." Lan JingYi inclined his head with a smile. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, looking down.

"It really does suit Lan SiZhui." ZeWu-Jun agreed.

"Too bad it was disgraced later." Jin Ling huffed next to them. Lan JingYi threw him a sharp look. The seniors seemed confused by this.

They continued on, telling them about arriving to Qishan. The tale of the last portion of the Sunshot Campaign, the battles in Qishan and Nightless City were detailed further, Jin Ling laying out not only the part where they were involved, but the movements of the whole army as well. They talked about Lan SiZhui using musical cultivation to control the puppets, and naturally, at this, Grandmaster frowned deeply, disapproving. Lan SiZhui looked down and

refused to look up again while the others detailed the battle of Nightless City, about Wen Chao's escape, the accusations made against Lan SiZhui, then about the battle with Wen ZhuLiu.

Lan SiZhui looked up then, noticing Zidian on Jiang WanYin's hand sparkling as he clenched his hands into fists in anger. When Jin Ling got to the part where Wen ZhuLiu tried to destroy Lan JingYi then Lan SiZhui's Golden Core, Grandmaster Lan spoke up.

"What do you mean, he was unable to?" He asked.

"Ah, that's actually really curious." Lan JingYi told him. "Before, when he fought SiZhui, he also expressed he couldn't destroy his Core, only that he could damage it badly enough that SiZhui wouldn't be able to access it. SiZhui, you know this better, you spoke to him about this in detail, have you not?"

"Why would you chat with Wen ZhuLiu, especially about something like this?" Jiang WanYin scoffed at him in distaste.

Lan SiZhui sighed and nodded. "The way Wen ZhuLiu explained it, it made sense at the time. The technique he used to destroy Golden Cores was developed by the Western tribes as a torture method. When Wen ZhuLiu's Clan was destroyed by them, Wen RuoHan took him in. Since Wen ZhuLiu had a weak cultivation, he couldn't fight and was assigned to the library. He found the text that described this method as part of the loot they took from the Western tribes during their war with them. He took it in front of Wen RuoHan, who rewarded him by letting him learn this method.

"The way it works is this: the person would manipulate the Golden Core to drain or overcharge it at their will. Overcharging causes it to burn out, destroying the meridians. The Golden Core would 'melt' and the cultivator would receive internal injuries so severe he would eventually die. Wen ZhuLiu told me my Core was resistant towards this overcharge. However, even Wen Qing couldn't tell why it was not possible to crush my Core, and seeing Lan JingYi's couldn't be crushed either, I had a theory this might have something to do with time travel."

"Why did you think this?" Lan QiRen asked with a thoughtful expression, petting his beard.

"Well, that is the only common in us." Lan SiZhui said, then at Lan JingYi's protest, clicked his tongue. "Regarding our cultivation, JingYi. Wen ZhuLiu caused several people to lose their Cores back then as well, only the two of ours couldn't be crushed. When I was examined by Wen Qing, she said she couldn't find a reason for it."

"Indeed." Lan QiRen hummed.

"Uncle?" ZeWu-Jun questioned curiously.

"*Death of Autumn* works this way, you said yourself; the spell is supposed to bring the person or persons who perform it back to the place and time where they belong."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui confirmed.

“How did you figure this?”

“The *Collection of Time* had been written between the third and fourth stages of developing the Qin language. At this period, Inquiry was not yet defined, and the notes later refined in it were used to express a will. Because of this, I was able to decrypt how these songs were intended to be interpreted and used.

“*Song of Winter* had a strong intent to see something that was yet to come, therefore the interpretation is this: the song manipulates a person’s perception of time, making them see the future. *Spring Again* had a strong intent of longing for a time where someone hasn’t lived before. The interpretation of the song is this: the song is able to manipulate time and perception of time, bringing them back to a time they have not existed.

“*Beauty of Summer* has a strong intent of longing as well, but for something the person already lived through. It also has the intent of strong extremes. The interpretation is this: the song is able to manipulate the perception of time and maybe even time itself, to bring someone back to their happiest memory or their worst. *Death of Autumn* has a strong intent of longing and belonging, as well as homesickness. Because of this, the interpretation is this: this song is capable of manipulating time, bringing a person back to where they belong, regardless if they’re dead or not, therefore making it a song able to bring back the dead. It is also extremely similar to *Spring Again*. Because of this, it can be theorized that the two songs were intended to be used together, making them sisters. *Spring Again* brings you back in time, *Death of Autumn* brings you back to where you belong.”

There was silence around them for a long time. Lan SiZhui shared a confused look with his friends and Wei WuXian. Even Jiang WanYin seemed confused as to why the sudden silence from the Lan was all about.

“SiZhui, this knowledge, it is in our founder documents. To know all this, you had to study them very deeply.” ZeWu-Jun said, with inquiry in his voice. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

“ZeWu-Jun – that is, from the past – gave them to me to study. We needed to find a way to return home.”

“I see.” ZeWu-Jun hummed. “Then, we cannot fault you for this.”

“I don’t understand.” Jin Ling frowned. “These are the founder documents, not the *Collection of Turmoil*. Why couldn’t SiZhui study them, even if he was a Lan disciple?”

“Even if he was a Lan disciple?” ZeWu-Jun blinked, paling a little. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and bowed his head.

“Ah, we’ll tell you about this in a bit. Answer first.”

“The founder documents are not forbidden.” Lan QiRen was the one who answered. “However, the founding of Qin language is, since the experimental nature of this discovery resulted in some dangerous scores, misguided mistakes that have since been corrected by the Lan Sect.” He paused, then said: “However, concentrating on the original question, Lan SiZhui’s theory seems to align with what we know of the *Death of Autumn*. Since the notion



of belonging is included in it, it is probable that it is also present in *Spring Again*, therefore, making an imprint of the person or persons in their original time, for *Death of Autumn* to be able to bring them back. Since this is the case, while in soul and body you were indeed in the past, some of your presence had to have lingered here as well. The fact that you have been away for two years here and in the past two years also passed since you arrived, proves this theory further.”

“Wait.” Lan JingYi spoke up. “Does that mean, even if Jin Ling was never born in the past, he would not have just disappeared?”

“Mn.” Lan QiRen shook his head. “The moment one creates their own past is the moment they destroy their own future. The moment you arrived to the past, this future was supposed to cease to exist. Since you’re magically tied to it, this did not happen.”

“But then, did the other world we left behind cease to exist the moment we left?” Wei WuXian asked next. Lan QiRen hummed thoughtfully.

“It is possible, but not certain.”

“JingYi and SiZhui still have their scars from being punished there.” Jin Ling said. “Isn’t that proof that that world wasn’t just an illusion?”

“Indeed.” Lan QiRen nodded grimly.

“Alright.” Jiang WanYin huffed. “Get on with it.”

“Mn.” Lan JingYi agreed and continued.

They spoke about the battle with Wen ZhuLiu, about how afterwards Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian tried to counter the Yin Iron’s influence via musical cultivation. Wen Chao’s appearance and threats. About how they fought and ended up splitting up, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui going inside the palace. How they faced Wen RuoHan along with Nie MingJue. About the Wen Sect Leader’s plan to learn about the future. About Lan JingYi killing Wen RuoHan.

“You?” Jiang WanYin scoffed at this. Lan JingYi huffed.

“Me, yes. I killed him. I’m Feng CiKe, after all.” He raised his chin in arrogance. Jin Ling rolled his eyes next to him.

They continued telling them about the fight that came next, although Lan SiZhui brushed over the details of how he took control of the Yin Iron shards, about how he tortured Wen Chao before the Second Young Master Wen met his end with Suihua embedded in his chest.

“Ah, Jin Ling, did you really just borrow it?” Wei WuXian asked with a grin. Jin Ling threw up his hands.

“Why does everyone think I stole the dumb sword?! I went up to Jin ZiXuan, once the fight was over and asked: ‘Are you done? Can I borrow your sword?’ And then I went to help SiZhui and JingYi!”

“Well, did you wait until he said yes?!” Lan JingYi challenged. Jin Ling glared at him but didn’t answer, and based on this, Lan SiZhui knew the answer. Lan JingYi began to laugh, along with Wei WuXian.

“He didn’t even mention it afterwards!” Jin Ling defended. “He just took it back!”

“A-Ling, just how many of your ancestors did you offend while you were there?!” Jiang WanYin growled, massaging the bridge of his nose. At this, Lan JingYi laughed even harder.

“All of them! He even offended Lady Jiang!”

“I did not offend her!” Jin Ling protested.

“You reprimanded her when she implied Lan SiZhui might be dead, while he was in the Burial Mounds, then told her she mustn’t be interested in matters such as saving him. And then, when we were—”

“Would you just shut up?!” Jin Ling snapped, his face beet red.

“You continuously fought Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu, not even talking about how you addressed Jin GuangShan – you almost shot him multiple times and told him that he had no right to judge you.”

“I’m starting to understand now, why the three of you were punished.” Jiang WanYin grumbled under his breath. “Alright, just continue. Once you’re done, we’ll address... This.”

“You don’t need to address anything!” Jin Ling protested. “I’m not a child anymore.”

“Maybe, but you’re hardly mature enough if you still speak with Sect Leaders like this.” Jiang WanYin glared at him. “Continue.”

From here came the recounting of the events during the celebratory banquet. They spoke about the revelation that Jin GuangYao might know where they were from, then later they talked about Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen stealing the documents proving they were from the future, also about Nie MingJue’s confrontation of them. At these events, ZeWu-Jun seemed embarrassed, and Grandmaster Lan seemed to be judging his nephew as well, but they didn’t speak up, letting the three of them talk. They spoke about the deals made about the Wen and about Wen RuoHan’s library as well. They spoke about the accusations made towards Lan SiZhui.

Once they got to how Lan SiZhui proposed to look through the Wen Sect’s library, Grandmaster hummed thoughtfully.

“At the time, I was not present. It didn’t even occur to most of us, I think, to look over the Wen Sect’s possessions for anything useful. If what you describe about your findings is true, that is truly a loss to the cultivation world. To have so much knowledge burnt and lost forever...”

Lan SiZhui held himself back from arguing. After all, weren’t the seniors completely fine with this, until Lan SiZhui brought it up? Wasn’t it hypocritical to say they were disappointed

by the knowledge lost, while in the past, they were content to let Lan SiZhui's entire Sect's history burn? Lan SiZhui felt his agitation rise and along with this, Hudie's as well. This was an old wound by now, that never healed, since Lan SiZhui began to learn about his Sect. So many things have been buried with the last of the Wen Sect. There was nobody this time around who would be able to recall their heritage.

After all, the winners wrote the history books.

"SiZhui!" Someone snapped and he looked over, seeing Jin Ling glaring at him. Looking around, Lan SiZhui saw most people were looking at him. ZeWu-Jun seemed worried, half-risen from his seat, as if to run to get healers, while Wei WuXian had his flute out. Lan SiZhui took a deep breath and calmed down. Once they saw he was fine, the others also settled. Grandmaster was looking at him with a frown on his face.

"Let us continue." Lan SiZhui said shortly. There was a pause, then Jin Ling huffed, continuing.

They talked about leaving the Nightless City, of Jin Ling going with his father to supervise the Wen prisons. Lan SiZhui didn't talk about his chat with Wei WuXian regarding the Stygian Tiger Amulet and Hudie, but he saw it on the other's face he knew he left it out. After all, when they spoke in the village after Wei WuXian was stabbed, when Wei WuXian accused them of coming from the future, he revealed they talked about this.

They spoke of going to the Cold Pond Cave, curing those who were affected by the Yin Iron. Jin Ling talked about overlooking the Wen with his father. Then, all of them quieted, looking towards Lan SiZhui.

"Why did you stop talking?" Jiang WanYin frowned.

"When we were in Guanyin temple, back when Jin GuangYao's crimes were revealed..." Lan SiZhui began quietly. "I also realized something. You all probably know by now, but back then, I realized that by birth, I was a Wen." Nobody said anything to this. "Knowing what I did about the future, remembering some of how my childhood was like... I knew that the Wen needed protection.

"An advantage of being from the future was that we knew these events in advance." Lan SiZhui said, then took a deep breath. "Because of this, I knew it was only a matter of time that the Jin would arrest those Wen living in the Dafan Mountain."

"Is that how it was?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Don't interrupt." Jin Ling requested, strangely emotionless. Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows at this, but understanding this was serious, kept quiet.

"When we first arrived to the past, I didn't want to act because I didn't have a serious attachment to these people. However, since we arrived, I not only got to know Wen Qing and Wen Ning, but also some of the history of my birth family. To leave them to their fate like this felt wrong by then and I knew I couldn't do it. I even had an excuse to go, since Wen Qing previously said the sword I picked up in the Xuanwu cave belonged to her uncle.

“However, I also knew that if I wanted to protect them, there was a possibility that I had to fight the Jin, if not the Nie as well. Knowing the political landscape somewhat, I also knew that would I do that, would I take a serious stand by the Wen, my actions could be interpreted as the actions of the Lan Sect. Because of this, another power struggle, possibly a fight could break out. I couldn’t rely on the Lan Sect in this matter anymore.

“Because of this, I made the decision to leave.”

“SiZhui, when you say leave...” ZeWu-Jun began and Lan SiZhui looked over at him, sighing softly.

“I left the Lan Sect back then, ZeWu-Jun.”

“No.” Hanguang-Jun said, suddenly and with vehemence. Everyone looked over, but he was watching Lan SiZhui angrily.

“I assume this means I agreed?” ZeWu-Jun asked, turning back to Lan SiZhui, who nodded.

“No.” Hanguang-Jun repeated. “The moment one creates their own history, they erase their future. This is not that future.”

“I understand, Hanguang-Jun, but—”

“No but.” Hanguang-Jun said strictly.

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui argued. “But, but I officially resigned from the Lan Sect, gave back my ribbon, this was approved by the Lan Sect Leader, even if this happened in the past, this still happened.”

“In another world.” Hanguang-Jun shook his head.

“Ah... What do the elders say to this?” Wei WuXian asked, looking over at ZeWu-Jun and Lan QiRen. The Grandmaster inhaled deeply, seemingly deep in thought. ZeWu-Jun was also looking at his uncle.

“For now...” Lan QiRen began slowly, but then Hanguang-Jun cut in again.

“No.” He said, standing. “I did not approve. Family should also be asked.”

“WangJi, sit down.” Lan QiRen frowned at him. “I didn’t say anything. For now, let us hear the rest. Once we’re clear about everything that transpired, we will discuss this.”

Hanguang-Jun remained standing for a long moment, glaring at his uncle, but then he sat, a stubborn and defiant look on his face. Lan SiZhui shared a look with his friends, then continued.

He told them about traveling to the Wen village, about the people’s reluctance to help him. He told them how he found his way there eventually, only to find out the man who helped him was the same whom the sword belonged to. He told them a little about what it was like to live with them, but didn’t go into detail. Then, he told them about the Jin attacking. He told

them he used Hudie to fend off the attackers, only to be knocked out and how he woke in the Jin Sect's guest rooms. Here, he paused.

"Before we tell you the rest, we should come clear about something." He said with a sigh. He knew he couldn't hide the existence of the Stygian Tiger Amulet forever, and Wei WuXian knew about it anyways, so lying would be stupid and unnecessary.

"SiZhui, are you sure?" Lan JingYi asked with a frown. Lan SiZhui shrugged.

"He's right. The next events would be hard to explain without this." Jin Ling agreed, but then turned back to the seniors. "However, this, you have to swear. Lan SiZhui, Lan JingYi and I received fitting punishment to our actions. Wei WuXian as well." He waved his hand dismissively. "I refuse to be judged because of this, and I'll not accept anyone here to be judged by this either."

"You make it sound like you were raising fierce corpses to strangle Jin GuangShan with, A-Ling. I'm sure this isn't this dramatic." Jiang WanYin scoffed.

"It is exactly this dramatic." Jin Ling told him.

"Judging by what we heard..." ZeWu-Jun hesitated, looking over at his uncle, who thought deeply.

"Since you have been punished for it already, I don't see why we couldn't promise. However, this is with the assumption that whatever it is you did, you do not plan on continue doing here, in our time. The time for fights and war is over." He said.

"Well, then swear on it." Jin Ling told him. Lan QiRen pursed his lips and nodded.

"Alright." ZeWu-Jun also agreed.

"Uncle?" Jin Ling looked over at Jiang WanYin, who raised his eyebrows at this.

"Why do you need me to swear us well, huh? What did you do?"

"We're not telling you until you swear, Sect Leader Jiang." Jin Ling said with his back straight and voice and expression serious.

"... Fine." Jiang WanYin agreed in the end. "I swear."

"Good." Jin Ling nodded. Lan SiZhui exchanged a look with them, then took a deep breath, turning to Wei WuXian.

"Senior Wei, if I may." He held out his hands. Lan JingYi looked at him questioningly, then he must've realized what he wanted, because he jumped on his feet.

"No way!"

"SiZhui, we're not giving you Hudie back!" Jin Ling agreed, glaring at him. "Just tell them, don't you know how to speak?"

“Ah, guys.” Wei WuXian sighed. “It’s fine. That’s not how it works.”

“It’s fine, he says, did you have to fight SiZhui because of it?!” Jin Ling glared at him.

“SiZhui isn’t Wen RuoHan.” Wei WuXian said.

“Of course he isn’t!” Jin Ling snapped.

“Then don’t treat him like he is. He is capable of this without losing control again, he is not even going to use it. Right?” Wei WuXian raised his eyebrows. Lan SiZhui huffed and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I don’t trust you.” Jin Ling glared at him. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together.

“Alright.” Lan JingYi said. “I do trust him.”

“Don’t just say the exact opposite of what I’m saying because your goal in existence is to defy me!” Jin Ling slapped the table, glaring up at Lan JingYi, who rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be an idiot. Look around, just how many people would be able to stop him, including you, if he lost control? But he won’t, this isn’t like you think.” He gestured to Wei WuXian, who also sighed, but got up and handed over the qiankun pouch. He didn’t go back to his place, however, defying his earlier words, his hand on Chenqing, standing to the side. Lan SiZhui glanced at him there, but then concentrated on the pouch in his hand. He summoned Hudie from the qiankun pouch. Glancing at it, Lan SiZhui felt sad. The Stygian Tiger Amulet’s half merged with his guqin, this meant he would never be able to use it as a proper spiritual tool, even if he ever regained his spiritual powers.

Hudie was just as he left it, although more agitated. Now resentful energy rolled off it in a form of thick, black, ink-like smoke. Lan SiZhui smoothed his fingers over the strings, plucking them, calming the strong killing intent he felt in the tool. This also made his chest tight, but he ignored the sensation.

“Is this Hudie?” Lan QiRen asked curiously, knocking Lan SiZhui out of his meditative state of playing. Looking up and around, he saw the others were looking at him as well. Wei WuXian had narrowed his eyes at him, but didn’t make a move to stop him. Jin Ling had Huangfeng in his hand but not drawn. The Lan were only watching him, while Zidian was also summoned. Lan SiZhui nodded to the Grandmaster. Turning to their audience, he explained:

“During the fight in the Xuanwu cave, Wei WuXian found a strange sword. Coming out of the cave, he was still clutching it, refusing to let go of it. I found it strange and familiar as well, but we departed before I could examine it properly. Later, when we visited Lotus Pier, I asked him about it, but he claimed to have no knowledge of it. Then, after I left the Burial Mounds, he claimed he found me because something woke him and urged him to take a walk towards where I emerged. Later, we realized this was the same strange sword he found in the Xuanwu cave.

“I examined it and realized this was the last shard of the Yin Iron, having been refined previously into a sword. I left it with Wei WuXian, thinking it was safer if he had it and didn’t know he did. Later, he figured it out, but I still entrusted him with it, hoping people would not suspect him; this was also by the time Sunshot Campaign was on the horizon, and we didn’t have time to deal with it.

“I didn’t really think about it until the last battle in Nightless City. As we said previously, Wei WuXian and I subdued the puppets Wen RuoHan created through musical cultivation, then we separated. At this time, I didn’t notice, but when we separated, Wei WuXian snuck something into the qiankun pouch that held Hudie. When I fought Wen RuoHan, I realized what it was. Ever since then, I’ve been using it with combination of musical cultivation to fight.”

“What is it?” ZeWu-Jun asked. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together and played some notes on Hudie. The gentle sounds of the guqin were both relaxing and not. The notes to call forth the Stygian Tiger Amulet’s half were just as effective as always, maybe a little more, thanks to the agitated state of the resentful energy.

Lan SiZhui chanced a look towards his seniors. Wei WuXian was watching the Stygian Tiger Amulet with a thoughtful expression. ZeWu-Jun had his eyes closed in disappointment. Lan QiRen was pursing his lips disapprovingly. Looking over, Lan SiZhui saw Jiang WanYin glaring at the guqin and Lan SiZhui with unmatched hatred in his expression, while Lan WangJi was just looking at him with an unreadable expression, though his hand was clutching Bichen until his knuckles turned white. Lan SiZhui inhaled and played some subduing notes, making the Yin Iron shard fade into black smoke then into nothing.

“Hand it back now.” Jin Ling told him. Lan SiZhui sighed, but he didn’t protest as he handed Hudie back to Wei WuXian, who bagged it carefully.

“Jin Ling, that’s still not how the tool works.” Wei WuXian told him.

“And I don’t care.” He said.

“So, Lan SiZhui followed in Wei WuXian’s footsteps and strayed onto the unorthodox path.” Lan QiRen said, sounding angry.

“It’s not like he had a choice.” Lan JingYi said. “When he fell into the Burial Mounds, Wen ZhuLiu has injured his Golden Core and he had to use the resentful energy, so it won’t kill him. Then, later, he had to use it to fight Wen RuoHan’s puppets. We didn’t even know Wei WuXian created the Stygian Tiger Amulet again, he wasn’t supposed to do that this time around. Then, the Yin Iron merged with Hudie and we couldn’t just get rid of it, and... Well, to be honest, we didn’t really think it was that serious.”

“Lan SiZhui’s primary spiritual tool merged with Wei WuXian’s resentful spiritual tool, and you didn’t think this was a serious matter?” Grandmaster Lan glared at Lan JingYi, who shrugged awkwardly.

“It’s really not that, Grandmaster. But we had other things to worry about, and... Well, Lan SiZhui was handling it fine!”

“From what you said, from what the healer also found, it does not seem to me as if he was ‘handling it fine’.” Lan QiRen huffed, frustrated. “Wei WuXian, show me the tool.”

“Uh...” Wei WuXian hesitated, looking over at Jin Ling, Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui. Jin Ling shrugged, Lan JingYi nodded, though Lan SiZhui wasn’t enthusiastic about this. Still, Wei WuXian had no real choice, so he went over and handed it over. Lan SiZhui watched as Lan QiRen summoned Hudie and examined the guqin. He swiped his fingers over every available surface, but found nothing. In the end, he hummed.

“This will need to be studied. I’m confiscating this.”

“Grandmaster, this is—” Lan SiZhui began, not liking this. However, Grandmaster gave him a look that expressed a warning not to speak up, to not argue about this. Lan SiZhui looked back defiantly. “Hudie is my spiritual tool. I think Grandmaster should ask for permission before confiscating it first.”

“I’m confiscating it, this means I take this as an authority figure. I’m the Lan Sect’s elder.”

“And I’m not part of the Lan Sect anymore.” Lan SiZhui told him angrily.

“SiZhui.” Hanguang-Jun warned lowly. Lan SiZhui ignored him.

Grandmaster Lan seemed to be deep in thought. Then, in the end he said: “This is not yet determined to be the case. Until the elders debate and decide, we will look to you as a disgraced Lan disciple, and nothing less. Therefore, confiscating this tool is not out of line.”

Lan SiZhui glared at him, but in the end, he knew he couldn’t win. Frustrated, he huffed, then squared his shoulders and turned back to the others.

“Grandmaster, please, don’t be angry. The truth is, we all had to be pretty defensive about this, due to Jin GuangShan fighting for the Yin Iron hidden inside, and so we just don’t want it to fall into the wrong hands.” Lan JingYi said.

“My hands are hardly the wrong ones. What do you mean ‘fight him’?” Lan QiRen asked skeptically.

“Well, not like that.” Lan JingYi shook his head, then began to explain how him and Jin Ling met while Lan SiZhui was away, and then went to retrieve him from the Wen village, only to find it empty. How they went to Qiongqi path next to find him, only to find Jin GuangYao and Su She conspiring.

They told them about their theory of the two trying to extract the Stygian Tiger Amulet from Hudie, how it might’ve affected Su She, hence his condition in the cave in Moling. They spoke about reuniting during the Crowd Hunt, then going to Qiongqi to investigate, only to receive Wei WuXian as an unwanted guest on their mission. Then they spoke about how they found the Wen there, and even after they decided to go back, Lan SiZhui went back for the Wen and took them to the Burial Mounds. Here, Hanguang-Jun and Wei WuXian exchanged a look but did not comment.



Then Jin Ling and Lan JingYi spoke about their plans and conspiracies. Eventually, they spoke about how Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi arrived to the Burial Mounds, and how they stayed, how then not long after the Sects arrived. How Jin GuangShan got the truth of Lan SiZhui's parting from the Lan Sect out of them and how he revealed the Stygian Tiger Amulet's existence just to make his point.

They talked about how in the meantime Jin Ling and Jin ZiXuan snuck the Wen out. They spoke about the following fight, and that was when Wei WuXian was stabbed.

Here, Wei WuXian also joined the recalling of events, since this was also the time when he arrived to the past. They talked about the village they took the Wen, about how Wei WuXian was injured. About their plan to wait the Sects out and fight them would they come to confront them. They talked about hearing about the discussion conference from Lan XiChen and in Lan SiZhui's case, Tao Jun as well. About their debate what could be done in this situation. Then deciding to keep waiting, until the day of the conference Wen Ning went missing. How they rushed to save him, only to end up being confronted by the Sects again and fight, and... Wen Qing's death as well.

They spoke about the fight, about Wei WuXian destroying his half, keeping quiet about the other. Here, Jin Ling turned to the other and glared at him.

"What were you plotting then, huh?!" He asked accusingly.

"I wasn't plotting!" Wei WuXian protested. "But I didn't know if we were going to have to fight again. This was SiZhui's only weapon against the others without his spiritual powers. What was I supposed to do? I know what it's like."

"You know what it's like? What are you even talking about?" Jin Ling scoffed.

"Jin Ling, you know what I'm talking about." Wei WuXian sighed. Jin Ling made a face at this.

"I don't." Lan JingYi said, raising his hand. Wei WuXian also made a face and looked around present company, before he sighed and said:

"To those who don't know yet, when I fell into the Burial Mounds, while I used demonic cultivation in my previous life... I also didn't have my spiritual powers."

"What?!" Lan JingYi exclaimed, staring at him wide eyed.

Wei WuXian pulled his mouth and looked away. "I'm only telling you this, because SiZhui doesn't understand."

"So, he's more like you, congratulations, Wei WuXian." Jiang WanYin rolled his eyes. Wei WuXian huffed. Lan SiZhui glanced over to see his friends' reaction, only to see that Jin Ling didn't seem surprised in the least and he furrowed his brows, confused.

"Jin Ling, did you know this?" Jin Ling looked startled at being addressed. Then, he reluctantly said:

“I did. I wanted to tell you a couple of times, but the timing never seemed right.”

“That’s why you were so fucking touchy about Wen ZhuLiu!” Lan JingYi suddenly exclaimed, pointing at his friend accusingly. Jin Ling rolled his eyes and swatted his hand away.

“So, what if I was? Uncle told me properly after Guanyin temple, but he made me swear not to tell anyone.” He said. “You just had to push and push, didn’t you?!”

“Hey! How would I have known?! You were really weird about this!”

“When you told me you thought we were time travelers.” Lan SiZhui turned back to Wei WuXian, frowning. “When you talked about the resentful energy…”

“I spoke from experience, SiZhui.” Wei WuXian told him. “However, you’re in a different situation, right? Your Core is intact. If your meridians can be repaired, your spiritual energy should purge your Core from the resentful energy.” At this, Lan SiZhui was the one to look away.

“Anyhow, let’s continue.” Lan JingYi said after an uncomfortable pause. “It’s almost dinnertime and we’re almost finished.”

So, they continued, they said how their fates then were determined by the four Sects. They spoke briefly about their punishments – it wasn’t only Lan SiZhui who was reluctant to talk about this, but all three of them. Then, Jin Ling explained how Jin ZiXuan and Lan XiChen conspired, how he broke Lan SiZhui out of prison then they fled, eventually deciding to confront Jin GuangYao and Su She. They told them about the events in the cave in Moling and about how they brought Jin GuangYao to justice. How upon returning to the Cloud Recesses, they were offered to go back and decided to take this opportunity, researching for a month to come up with the solution. Then, they explained how they performed the song and still thought they were in the past upon waking.

“And from here, you know.” Jin Ling finished.

“Mn.” ZeWu-Jun hummed. They were quiet for a long moment, then ZeWu-Jun looked over them. “I think it’s time for all of us to retire. As for tomorrow, please rest. We will have a lot to discuss with the elders. Sect Leader Jin, while I know it must be a lot to ask, but please, don’t return to the Koi Tower just yet. I’ll call together a Cultivation Conference where we can tell the others you’re back.”

“We really shouldn’t tell them we traveled in time.” Jin Ling told them with a frown. ZeWu-Jun also shook his head.

“No, I wasn’t planning on it either. As far as I’m comfortable with this, this information should not leave this room at all.”

“What about your elders?” Jin Ling cocked an eyebrow.

“They already know what *Spring Again* and the *Collection of Time* is capable of.” ZeWu-Jun said. “Keeping this a secret would be useless.”

“Fine. But other than them, nobody is to know.” He looked over all of them.

“Agreed.” Jiang WanYin frowned.

“One more thing. Lan SiZhui should really go to Cold Pond Cave.”

“Jin Ling, the healer Madam Han said—”

“I don’t care.” Jin Ling told him with a sharp look. “Wen Qing told me with the healing energies of the Cold Pond Cave, your condition is manageable. Also, that your meridians would benefit from it. She was always your doctor, so listen to her now.”

“Ah, MouShi, I didn’t know you liked her this much.” Lan JingYi teased.

“Who liked her?!” Jin Ling glared at him. “I didn’t, but she knew Lan SiZhui’s condition best, or was she not the one to care for him almost every time he got injured?”

“Listening to her advice over Madam Han’s, you really know what you’re talking about.” Lan JingYi grinned, teasing.

“Lan JingYi, do you know what it feels like to be hit by Huangfeng? Do you want to learn?!”

“Don’t threaten me, who believes you?!”

“You—!”

“Alright.” ZeWu-Jun halted their bickering. “SiZhui, naturally, you’re allowed in the Cold Pond Cave whenever you wish to go.”

Lan SiZhui smiled at him tightly. “ZeWu-Jun, I thought only Lan disciples were allowed there and required the Lan forehead ribbon to enter.”

“I will get you a new ribbon.” Hanguang-Jun told him with a tone that booked no arguments.

“Is that proper, Hanguang-Jun?” Lan SiZhui bit his lip. “After all, the elders still haven’t decided if—”

“Mn, I’ll deliver it after dinner.” Lan SiZhui sighed in the face of his adoptive father’s stubbornness. He knew there was no arguing with him when he got like this, so instead, he just nodded.

“Go back now and rest.” ZeWu-Jun told them kindly. The three of them then stood and bowed to their seniors, before retiring for the night.

## Tranquility Part 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They took their dinner to Lan SiZhui's room, as it was custom by then. After they finished eating, Jin Ling poured them all tea.

"Well, this didn't go horribly wrong. Nobody got whipped with Zidian and Lan SiZhui was treated. I'd say we did good." Jin Ling mused.

"Ah, what do you guys think we should tell the others who ask?" Lan JingYi asked.

"What do you mean?" Jin Ling frowned at him.

"Surely, our other friends are going to ask where we've been."

"What friends do you have?" Jin Ling snorted. Lan JingYi rolled his eyes. "I don't know. Something plausible."

"Thanks, that's really helpful." Lan JingYi huffed. "What about you, what will you say then?"

"I'll just tell them it's none of their business." Jin Ling shrugged.

"Do you ever say anything else?"

"I do." Jin Ling nodded. "For example; 'Lan JingYi, shut up'!"

"Oh for—" Before he could go on, unexpectedly there was a knock on the door. The three of them froze, then looked over. Lan SiZhui stood and went over, opening the door. Upon seeing Hanguang-Jun on the other side, he bowed.

"Hanguang-Jun!" Lan JingYi jumped on his feet behind Lan SiZhui. "Hi!"

"SiZhui." Hanguang-Jun said, and even though it had been a while, Lan SiZhui could still read his adoptive father's expression.

"Ah, come in, Hanguang-Jun." He invited, stepping to the side. At this, Jin Ling also stood, picking up the emptied trays.

"We'll get going then." He said. "Hanguang-Jun." He inclined his head towards the other, then nudged Lan JingYi forward, who bowed to the other and also hurried out of the room. Once they were gone and the door was closed behind them, Lan SiZhui turned to Hanguang-Jun, standing just inside the room. He looked around, then his gaze settled on Lan SiZhui.

"Um. Would you like some tea, Hanguang-Jun?" Hanguang-Jun shook his head.

“Here.” Hanguang-Jun reached into his sleeve and pulled out a little bundle. Lan SiZhui immediately recognized the silk fabric and the embroidery on it. He took it with a bittersweet feeling, rubbing the forehead ribbon between his fingers, but not putting it on.

“Thank you.” He said quietly.

“SiZhui.” Hanguang-Jun began, then halted. Lan SiZhui looked up at him, waiting for him to continue. When he didn’t, he prompted:

“Yes, Hanguang-Jun?”

“What you did for the Wen...”

“I did what I thought was right.” He said quietly. “I just wanted to protect them.”

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer. Then, he asked: “Wen Qing’s uncle and his wife, who had the child... That was A-Yuan, wasn’t it?” Lan SiZhui nodded silently. “Mn.”

They were quiet for a long time. Lan SiZhui didn’t know what to say and Hanguang-Jun didn’t say anything either, though it felt like he knew what he wanted to say, just didn’t know how to say it. Lan SiZhui was familiar with this, but this time he didn’t push the issue.

“Come to the Jingshi tomorrow evening for tea.” He requested in the end. Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“I’d like that.” He nodded. Hanguang-Jun seemed satisfied with this and then turned, opening the door.

“Good night, SiZhui.”

“Good night, Hanguang-Jun.” Lan SiZhui greeted, then watched as Hanguang-Jun exited his rooms, pulling the door closed behind himself.

There were still a lot of things to do before their lives could return to normal, and a lot of things to explain. Lan SiZhui’s status in the Sect was still not clear. He glanced at the forehead ribbon Hanguang-Jun gave him. In the past, Lan SiZhui always felt a disconnect from his birth family. While when he was younger, he didn’t know who they were, even though he knew he wasn’t Lan WangJi’s son, he was never truly curious about their identity. After all, he had a good life, why ask about irrelevant things?

Then later, when the Ghost General returned and with this, Lan SiZhui’s memories as well, he felt an obligation to pay his respects to his late family. However, even back then he didn’t really feel he truly belonged to them. After all, the Wen weren’t the ones who raised him.

However, once he returned to the past and got to know those people... How could he not care anymore? They were his family, and since then, he also realized they were important. Hao YiFei, his mother, was kind and funny, protective and considerate. His father, Wen XiaoQiang was also kind, hard-working and easy-going. His cousins, even those he didn’t know well, were all people he came to care about. How could he deny this connection?

Lan SiZhui never regretted leaving the Lan Sect. Even if he felt sad about this, he realized he was also his own person. He was not bound by the rules, although his own conducts also aligned with many of them. Looking at the ribbon, he knew, he could live as a Lan again. But did he want to? After all, his family was also here. How could he fit into both, a Sect the world despises and a Sect the world admires, where did he truly belong?

With these thoughts in mind, Lan SiZhui put the ribbon aside. These issues could wait. For now, he just wanted to rest, without any threats or plots hanging above him for the first time in a very long time.



Lan SiZhui didn't hear anything the next day from the elders, or what decision they came to. He went to Hanguang-Jun's Jingshi for tea as agreed. They settled at the table like old times, although Lan SiZhui got an angry look for the lack of forehead ribbon, this was not mentioned further. That day Lan SiZhui didn't really leave his rooms, so he didn't have a chance to interact with his disciple mates.

Lan WangJi served them tea, then they sat and enjoyed it in tranquil quiet. Soon, Hanguang-Jun put down his cup and looked at Lan SiZhui, prompting he wanted to speak, so Lan SiZhui did the same.

"Your injuries." Hanguang-Jun asked. Lan SiZhui smiled at him tightly.

"It is not worse, nor better since Madam Han treated me." He reported. Hanguang-Jun hummed. There was a pause, then he continued:

"In the past... you met your parents."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, looking down.

"Who were they?"

"My mother was Hao YiFei, a healer. My father was Wen XiaoQiang, Wen RuoHan's cousin." He explained a little about his family history, or what he knew about it. Hanguang-Jun seemed to take this in and memorize it. He also asked about how they died, so Lan SiZhui told him in detail, while the other day he only explained briefly.

"They sound like they were good people." Hanguang-Jun concluded in the end. Lan SiZhui smiled and nodded.

"They were."

"Since you met them... I understand why you would want to leave the Lan Sect." He said quietly. Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows.

"It's not that at all, Hanguang-Jun. I don't... Ah, it's hard to explain." He huffed, irritated he couldn't explain properly. "I left the Sect in the first place to protect ZeWu-Jun."

"Mn." Hanguang-Jun nodded. "Now there is no need. You still refuse."

“It’s not that I refuse.” Lan SiZhui pulled his mouth. “It just doesn’t feel right. To dismiss this.” He thought for a moment of the best way to explain. Thankfully Hanguang-Jun let him, waiting him out. In the end, he said: “Even if the past we’ve created never happened, we still bear the scars from our time there. We still lived through those times as we’re living here now. For that time, Lan XiChen, the one of the past, was my Sect Leader. If we disregard these events just because they didn’t happen to the people presently here, that would indicate our time there didn’t matter, didn’t happen in a way.”

“It’s not that I’m so fond of it either. But the people we became by these experiences are different than the ones who left here two years ago. Doesn’t this also mean that past was just as real to us as this is? If I dismiss Lan XiChen’s decision to let me part from the Sect, if I dismiss my own decision to part from the Sect, it just feels like...” He frowned, unable to put into words. “This still happened. People here might not have experienced it, but I’ve lived it. For me, this is not as easy as just putting on the forehead ribbon and forget about it. Once I’ve made a decision, it has to account for something.”

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun hummed, falling into thought. Then, he said: “Jin GuangYao had a disciple who was banished from the Sect. Once Jin GuangYao died, while brother and Jiang WanYin took care of the Jin Sect, they advocated to be accepted back into the Sect.”

“Exactly.” Lan SiZhui nodded, understanding why Hanguang-Jun brought this up. “We should all handle this as a decision of a previous Sect Leader.”

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun nodded. Lan SiZhui smiled, glad to have found a way to express his feelings about this matter. “I’ll speak with the elders.”

“Thank you, Hanguang-Jun.” Hanguang-Jun hummed in answer, then said:

“SiZhui, about demonic cultivation.” Lan SiZhui tensed, knowing what was coming most likely. “Don’t look so upset.” Hanguang-Jun said after a moment. Lan SiZhui was surprised. “I am not judging you. When you were younger, you had... questions about dark energies. When answering, I advised you not to use such methods. Do you know why?”

Lan SiZhui frowned. Hanguang-Jun often asked questions like this, when Lan SiZhui couldn’t decide whether Hanguang-Jun wanted to hear the obvious answer, or if there was a different one Lan SiZhui had to figure out. He told the truth: “Isn’t it because these methods are unorthodox and frowned upon?”

At this, Hanguang-Jun gave him a flat look, and Lan SiZhui didn’t understand until he realized: Hanguang-Jun hardly ever cared about the opinion of others. Sure, he wouldn’t do anything that would put his Sect and brother in the wrong side of the public, but on a personal level, he truly never cared.

“Demonic cultivation is dangerous to the user. I’ve tried to explain this to Wei Ying as well, back then. My concern is your safety, not conduct.”

“I... didn’t intentionally cause harm.”

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun nodded. “Harm is still done. Now, it needs to be repaired. Madam Han’s advice is to spend time in the Cold Pond Cave.”

“If I go into seclusion there, I might never come out.” Lan SiZhui admitted. “According to Wen Qing, my condition might be beyond repair.” Hanguang-Jun watched him for a long moment, then held out his hand. Realizing he also wanted to examine him, Lan SiZhui also held out his arm. Hanguang-Jun examined his meridians and furrowed his brows. After a while, he dropped Lan SiZhui’s hand.

“According to Jin Ling and Lan JingYi, doctor Wen’s diagnosis is similar to the one Wen RuoHan had.”

“Yes.” Lan SiZhui nodded. Hanguang-Jun hummed. When he didn’t say anything for a long time, just sat there, looking thoughtful, Lan SiZhui quietly asked: “Hanguang-Jun?”

At this, the other looked up, apparently dismissing whatever thought entered his head.

“I’ll have to leave for a short time in the upcoming days. Please, remain here until I return.” Lan SiZhui blinked at him, finding the change in topic strange. Still, he nodded.

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Two days later, as promised, Hanguang-Jun indeed left. Wei WuXian went with him as well, which confused the three of them, nobody else seemed concerned that Hanguang-Jun left so soon after the return of his ward. He spoke to his brother and the elders as well, although there was still no decision made by them about Lan SiZhui’s status in the Sect. However, since then, ZeWu-Jun also called for a discussion conference. Although three of four major Sect Leaders were already present, the smaller Clans and Sects were also called as well as two of the elders from the Jin Sect.

Hanguang-Jun was still not back since he parted, but the discussion conference was fast approaching. Cloud Recesses was in an uproar because of this, and the three juniors were also tense. They haven’t heard anything from the Lan elders still. Jin Ling spoke to ZeWu-Jun the day before and at night they had dinner together, where he revealed even though he asked, ZeWu-Jun didn’t answer what they’re going to say to the others about their disappearance. It was also worrying that Wei WuXian left with Hanguang-Jun, but returned the day of the conference, without Hanguang-Jun by his side. They only heard this in the morning, but haven’t seen the other since then.

They spent breakfast together, but then they separated – Jin Ling met with the Jin elders who came to the discussion conference, and Lan JingYi had some disciple issues to take care of – usually Lan SiZhui’s task, but since there was still no official decision about his disciple status, Lan JingYi was the one to replace him until then. Their disciple mates were also seemingly very glad that they’ve returned, although Lan SiZhui spent most of his days since they returned in his rooms, when he was out, many people came up to him and expressed their relief of seeing him again.

“Jin Ling.” Lan SiZhui greeted his friend as he went up to him. It was around noon and all guests had arrived by then, the conference starting soon. Lan SiZhui was nervous, the last



discussion conference he was on ended in the death of a dear friend and him sentenced to twenty-five lashes. He quickly corrected himself. “Ah, sorry. Sect Leader Jin.” He bowed. They were outside amongst the main building, Jin Ling having finished his discussion with his elders, he was now just waiting around until the conference officially began. Lan SiZhui just emerged from his rooms, looking for his friends to join them. Jin Ling scoffed at him.

“What? Did we not agree long ago? We’re cousins by association. And we’re also sworn brothers, according to Wei WuXian’s stupid ceremony, so let’s not be formal with each other.”

“Ah, Jin Ling, does that mean I’m also your sworn brother?” Someone else spoke up, and they saw Wei WuXian approaching them, wearing dark clothes. He didn’t look road-weary, seemed freshly bathed and cheerful. Lan SiZhui wanted to know where had he been, but he knew it wasn’t his place to inquire. After all, him and Hanguang-Jun were now his seniors.

“Leave me alone!” Jin Ling scoffed. “Tell me instead, where have you been? Where is Hanguang-Jun? And where is Fairy?” Apparently, Jin Ling had no such issues.

“Huh?” Wei WuXian looked at him with wide eyes. “How would I know where your dog is?!”

“I sent her out to find you before the conference. She should be with you!”

“Ah, Jin Ling, why would you do such thing?” Wei WuXian pouted. “I haven’t seen your dog anyways! It’s a good thing too, Lan Zhan would’ve sliced it in half for my sake!”

“Just answer already!” Jin Ling clicked his tongue.

“Don’t be so demanding. I was helping Lan Zhan with something.”

“With what?” Jin Ling frowned at him.

“Just something.” Wei WuXian waved him off, looking to the side. “Ah, JingYi, you’re here, too!”

Indeed, Lan JingYi was also approaching. He nodded to Wei WuXian, then turned to the others.

“They’re ready to start. I still haven’t seen Hanguang-Jun.”

“Ah, don’t worry.” Wei WuXian said. “He will be back in a few days.”

“Do you know where he went?” Lan JingYi looked over at him. Wei WuXian sighed.

“You guys, you’re really nosy. Let’s just go to the conference, alright?”

Since the others were already ready to begin, they had no choice but to agree. Jin Ling led them towards the Reception Hall, where ZeWu-Jun was already speaking:

“... to inform these honorable people about something.” He was saying. Seeing the four of them in the doorway, he gestured them inside. Jin Ling straightened up and entered, to which several gasps from the various Sects was the answer. Nie HuaiSang even jumped up!

“Ah! Sect Leader Jin!” He exclaimed, pointing his fan at the other. “You’re back!”

“I’m back!” Jin Ling nodded, while Lan JingYi, Wei WuXian and Lan SiZhui went over to their respective places to the side.

“Sect Leader Jin, where have you been?” Asked one of the smaller Sect Leaders.

“Let me say this.” ZeWu-Jun prompted and Jin Ling nodded grimly, joining the others to the side. “Sect Leader Jin, Lan SiZhui and Lan JingYi have all been misplaced by a spell.” He explained. Jin Ling exchanged a look with the others, but they didn’t interrupt. “They were transferred to an unknown place, where nobody knew them and they knew nobody. They were swept up in the events of this place, going as far as fighting a war on their behalf. They have spent the past two years trying to return here, but only managed to find a counter spell now.”

Technically, the Lan Sect Leader was not lying, and so this explanation reflected reality truthfully, without going into detail.

“But they’re real, right?” Someone else asked. “I mean, they could be malicious spirits!”

“I reassure Clan Leader Si, we’ve also checked their credentials. They are definitely the people who went missing.”

“Is that... Ah, Sect Leader Lan, it had been a long time, but I’m definitely seeing Wei WuXian over there!” Nie HuaiSang said, leaning so far forward over the table, Lan SiZhui was worried he might topple over.

“Yes, that’s right!”

“It’s really him!”

“But how is this possible? Didn’t they say last time Mo XuanYu was Wei WuXian?”

“Ah, I can also explain!” Wei WuXian jumped to his feet as well. “While we were looking for these guys, I also used the spell. I was also replaced in this other place. I was also taken back with them, however, upon arriving I was already in this body!”

“How could this be?” People asked.

“The explanation is simple!” Wei WuXian claimed. “The spell that brought us back, it also had a different purpose. Basically, this spell takes you back to where you were supposed to be in the first place. However, this spell doesn’t care for bodies, only souls. Since I was never supposed to occupy Mo XuanYu’s body, it actually brought me back in my own body instead!”

“But then, where is Mo XuanYu?” Someone asked.

“Well...” Wei WuXian looked over at ZeWu-Jun awkwardly.

“We’re looking for him!” Jin Ling unexpectedly spoke up. “Before the conference, I spoke to my elders. I’ve ordered them to find Mo XuanYu, dead or alive. Actually, my spiritual dog is looking for him currently.”

“She is?” Wei WuXian frowned at him.

“Of course she is.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “I’ve figured this out when you said you haven’t met her. Fairy doesn’t know you’ve returned into your own body. Naturally, she was going to look for Mo XuanYu’s instead.”

“Ah, MouShi, you truly are a hidden genius!” Wei WuXian grinned at him. Jin Ling rolled his eyes at this.

“This is so confusing. Is Mo XuanYu Wei WuXian then? Or is Wei WuXian Mo XuanYu? Where is that youth we spoke with last time? Is he still the Jin Sect Leader?” A small Clan Leader asked. Jin Ling held his head.

“This is going to be so long.” He grumbled under his breath, then stood to address the question.

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“SiZhui!” Lan SiZhui’s door was thrown open, a disheveled-looking Lan JingYi appearing. Lan SiZhui blinked at him. This was a few days after the conference. After this, Jin Ling also left Cloud Recesses to go back to his Koi Tower, ‘make sure it still stood’ by his words. The Lan parted with him on good terms, with the promise he was going to return soon. “Hanguang-Jun returned, he’s waiting for you in the Jingshi.”

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui stood, quickly putting away the book he was reading and joining Lan JingYi on the way to the Jingshi.

They arrived soon and as they were granted permission, saw Hanguang-Jun and Wei WuXian sitting together at the other end of the table.

“Ah, SiZhui, you’re here!” He exclaimed. Hanguang-Jun inclined his head towards the other seats at the table, and Lan SiZhui went to sit. Only, then Hanguang-Jun didn’t begin, looking over Lan SiZhui’s shoulder at Lan JingYi, who was still standing in the doorway. The other boy quickly remembered himself.

“Ah, right, I’ll wait outside!” He said, closing the door. Hanguang-Jun then turned back to Lan SiZhui.

“SiZhui, don’t think we purposefully kept Lan Zhan’s whereabouts a secret.” Wei WuXian began instead of the other, without waiting to make sure Lan JingYi was out of hearing range. “It’s just that, we weren’t sure if we will find what we were looking for, so we didn’t want you to worry or feed false hopes. The truth is, Lan Zhan had an idea the other day. Since you mentioned several things, something occurred to us. First, you mentioned that you found

texts about Wen ZhuLiu's powers in Wen RuoHan's library. You also said Wen Qing was treating you and she said the diagnosis was the same as with Wen RuoHan.

"From this, we thought of something. We called for Wen Ning, then asked him if he knew about his sister's work with Wen RuoHan. Unfortunately, he revealed she was treating him with only acupuncture and if she thought that would help you, she would've definitely tried it. Since this was the case, we next asked about Wen RuoHan's library. Unfortunately, most of those materials had been burned after the Sunshot Campaign." He pressed his lips together, pausing. In this pause, Lan SiZhui spoke.

"You didn't have to go through all this trouble for me."

"Nonsense!" Wei WuXian shook his head. "We did. Anyways. Since the information was not available, I had another thought. You said that Wen ZhuLiu spoke about the war with the western tribes, right?"

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded.

"I know that MeishanYu was also part of that war. So, I sent Lan Zhan and Wen Ning to Meishan to ask around, if there was anyone who knew more about the matter of Golden Cores than us. They indeed found someone!"

"Mn?" Lan SiZhui was interested in this. Was there still someone who knew about those times?

"His name was Xiu Li!" Lan SiZhui furrowed his brows. Although he was sure he didn't know this person, the surname was familiar to him.

"Is the Xiu a cultivation clan?" He asked. Hanguang-Jun hummed.

"The Xiu Clan are a Wen branch. One of the Wen married into the Clan, since then, the Xiu is considered a familial Clan to the Wen."

"Ah, I remember now." Lan SiZhui nodded, indeed remembering. When he took the Wen for the first time, they faced the cultivation world in the Burial Mounds. Then, Wen Qing said something about the Jin attacking the Xiu Clan, just because they were Wen descendants. She knew this, because one of her cousins was visiting their family there when this happened. "And Xiu Li knows about Golden Cores?"

"Yes!" Wei WuXian beamed, then his energies dropped. "Although, he could not come up with a solution. But he did have some texts on the matter. Lan Zhan just returned with them." He gestured at the table. The papers Lan SiZhui saw them earlier, he passed them off as night-hunt reports, and didn't think much of it. Now, he saw they were written with poor handwriting and looked quite old. "We haven't gone through them, and it's not certain there is anything helpful in there. But I still wanted you to know that it seems like there's a solution." He smiled at Lan SiZhui.

"Mn." Lan SiZhui hummed, looking at the stack of papers. "Thank you for your efforts, Hanguang-Jun, brother Wei... However, I am not a doctor and have little knowledge about

Golden Cores. I'm not sure I can help with this."

"You don't need to!" Wei WuXian shook his head. "When Jiang Cheng—Ah, when I lost my Core, I actually did some research on this. I think I can make sense of this." He lifted one of the papers before letting it fall back. "If I can't, I'll just ask Madam Han. She seems reliable, and apparently is one of the best doctors of this time. Although, I'd love to discuss this with master Hua, unfortunately, in this time, they died during the Sunshot Campaign."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui nodded, sad to hear about this.

"I also spoke with brother." Hanguang-Jun spoke up for the first time in the following lull in the conversation. "The elders wish to speak with you before making a decision."

At this, Lan SiZhui lowered his eyes. "Did they not ask ZeWu-Jun and Grandmaster about this?"

"They did." Hanguang-Jun nodded, sounding just as upset as Lan SiZhui felt.

"Then, they believe my involvement is worse than they said." He concluded. Hanguang-Jun nodded. "Hanguang-Jun, if they decide not to take me back, do you think I'll get Hudie back?" He asked shyly, knowing Hanguang-Jun was not more fond of the tool than anyone else who came across it.

"I do not think so." Hanguang-Jun shook his head grimly.

"Ah, SiZhui, don't worry. Even if they don't take you into the Sect, I'll take you in!" Wei WuXian tapped his own chest twice with a grin. "We'll start our own Sect."

"Please, don't joke about this." Lan SiZhui huffed. "If people hear that the YiLing Patriarch and ChunYu-Jun want to create their own Sect, we will be hunted for the rest of our lives."

"Mm." Hanguang-Jun hummed. "Nobody would dare hunt a Sect Hanguang-Jun oversees." He said, and at this, Wei WuXian gasped dramatically.

"Ah, Lan Zhan! You'll also join our Sect?! Ahaha, great!" He grinned. "We will be a proper family then! The father," he gestured at Hanguang-Jun with his tea cup, "the mother," he tapped his own chest, then gestured at Lan SiZhui with a mischievous grin, "and their son! Hahaha!"

"Ah, brother Wei, in this case, I'd rather not be in this Sect, alright?" Lan SiZhui said awkwardly. At this, Wei WuXian just laughed louder.

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Indeed the elders summoned him for a questioning a day later. Lan SiZhui went nervously, not knowing what to expect. Once he was done, he met his friends outside.

"SiZhui!" Lan JingYi greeted him the moment he stepped out of the office. "How was it?!"

“Let him get a breath in!” Jin Ling next to him rolled his eyes, crossing his arms across his chest. Lan SiZhui’s gaze caught on the sword clutched in his hand.

“Ah, Jin Ling, you got your Suihua back.”

“Yes.” Jin Ling nodded grimly. “It was in the ancestor’s hall in Koi Tower. My uncle forced me to kneel there, that’s why I even noticed.”

“Who cares about your stupid sword and your punishment? I want to hear how SiZhui’s interrogation went!”

“It was a hearing, don’t be so dramatic.” Jin Ling huffed. He was gone for a few days before returning, claiming to have business with the Lan, only, he spoke to ZeWu-Jun only once since he had been back, spending the rest of the time in his guest rooms or hanging out with Lan JingYi and Lan SiZhui. The two Lan suspected, though neither would tell him this, that he was actually hiding here from his uncle, who didn’t want to come to Cloud Recesses unless absolutely necessary.

“It’s the same thing, shut up and listen to Lan SiZhui.”

“It’s *not* the same thing, didn’t I just say that?!” Jin Ling glared at his friend, who sighed, rolled his eyes and pointedly didn’t answer. Lan SiZhui smiled at their antics and told them about the hearing. The elders indeed questioned him thoroughly. They asked details about his misconducts, even wanted to hear about Lan SiZhui’s punishment, though he refused to go into detail about this. There was no decision made then, the elders going back to discuss what they’ve heard.

By the time he was done telling them this, they’ve already picked up their lunch and settled under the apple trees, eating in companionable silence. Once they were done, Jin Ling wanted to hear about Lan SiZhui’s condition.

“Have you been to the Cold Pond Cave as we’ve discussed?” He asked. Lan SiZhui shook his head.

“Madam Han gave me some pills to fend off qi deviation, but other than that, there had been no development.” He said, looking down at his leftover food.

“And the thing you’ve mentioned, about Wei WuXian’s solution?”

“The texts mostly involve details about people whose Golden Core was destroyed and how to treat those internal injuries.” He shook his head.

“Then, why haven’t you gone to the Cold Pond Cave?” Jin Ling frowned. “I thought Wen Qing said that would help.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui hummed. “I’m not a Lan disciple though. While I appreciate Hanguang-Jun’s sentiment, it is... I can’t explain it. It just doesn’t feel right.”

“How are things in the Koi Tower?” Lan JingYi asked then, thankfully distracting Jin Ling from interrogating Lan SiZhui. He didn’t know if his friend did this on purpose, but he was

grateful for the distraction nonetheless. Jin Ling huffed in annoyance.

“I’ve visited the dungeon Lan SiZhui was kept in.” He said grimly. “There are bones down there.” He looked at his friends pointedly. “I ordered my men to have it filled up and buried. I don’t care how bad a criminal is, nobody deserves to be locked down there. We have a proper prison, just use that!”

“And the elders were fine with that?” Lan JingYi raised his eyebrows.

“Who cares what they think?!” Jin Ling snapped. “I’ve replaced two of them anyways.”

“Ah?!” Lan JingYi looked at him wide-eyed. “This quickly?”

“Yes, well...” Jin Ling huffed. “I actually recognized two of my men. From the past. I was training with them back in the past. Even back then they seemed trustworthy, so I made them my elders.” He shrugged. “We will see if I was right.”

“Ah, right, isn’t this the strangest thing?!” Lan JingYi’s eyes widened. “I also recognized people from the past here! I’ve fought with them in the Sunshot Campaign!”

“So bizarre. And every time someone talks about Sect Leader Jiang, I constantly think they’re talking about my grandfather!”

“Ah, I don’t even know if it was a good thing we returned anymore. Everything just seems so different.” Lan JingYi sighed.

“When I talk to Hanguang-Jun, I constantly stop myself from mentioning things that happened here, in the future and referencing things to him that happened in the past.” Lan SiZhui also added. “At least, Senior Wei also gets this.”

“He must be so annoying, agreeing with you all the time!” Jin Ling sighed.

“It’s actually nice.” Lan SiZhui shrugged. “It feels like what happened to us was truly real.”

“Of course it was.” Jin Ling scoffed. “We have the scars to prove it.”



“SiZhui, thank you for coming.” ZeWu-Jun smiled at him as he gestured Lan SiZhui to sit. They were at the Hanshi, only the two of them. Lan SiZhui was summoned after dinner, so he came. Once they were both seated, he served tea, then waited to hear what ZeWu-Jun wanted to talk about. He suspected this was about the earlier hearing. “How are you, SiZhui?” ZeWu-Jun asked first. Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“I’m fine, ZeWu-Jun.” He answered truthfully. His scars were healing nicely and his back was much better than in the past already. As for his meridians and Golden Core, he could not say. According to Madam Han, the state of his Core didn’t change.

“I’ve heard that Young Master Wei didn’t find anything useful in the texts WangJi brought back.” He said sadly. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“No, there was nothing. I had no illusions about this though. My condition is unique. I doubt anyone else came across it, other than those we know of.”

“And we know how those ended.” ZeWu-Jun sighed. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together. “What about the Cold Pond Cave? Sect Leader Jin seemed convinced going there would help.”

“It’s not like that.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “According to Wen Qing, my condition would be manageable that way, meaning I’d likely die later rather than sooner.” At this, ZeWu-Jun’s brows furrowed. “Sorry.” Lan SiZhui apologized for bringing the mood down. “I didn’t mean to be this grim. I’m sure we can come up with something...”

“In every aspect that counts, you’re my nephew, SiZhui. There’s no need to be careful with me.” ZeWu-Jun shook his head, then sighed. “SiZhui, the reason I called you here today was because the elders came to a decision.” Lan SiZhui sat up straighter, eager for the answer. He felt like this happened before, not long ago actually. Wasn’t this the same situation when he was awaiting whether he could research *Spring Again* from the elders as well?

“Can I stay then?” He asked. ZeWu-Jun smiled at him.

“They’ve agreed your actions were committed under duress. They also concluded that the actions you took were widely affected by your knowledge of the future. Although the decision was not unanimous, most elders had no problem with taking you back into the Sect.”

Lan SiZhui took this in for a long time. Partially, he could hardly believe this. He was so convinced the elders would deny this notion, he hardly even hoped for a positive answer. Partially, he was still conflicted about this. Should he actually belong to the Lan Sect, knowing who his actual birth family was? Partially, he was just generally in disbelief. He didn’t understand.

“I committed horrible things.” He said confused. ZeWu-Jun sighed softly.

“Most elders agree you’ve already received your due punishment. Besides, they know you. You wouldn’t make such decisions lightly and they understand this.”

“I see.” Lan SiZhui frowned.

“SiZhui, considering this... If WangJi and Young Master Wei can’t come up with a solution, will you consider going to the Cold Pond Cave?” ZeWu-Jun asked, his face a mask of worry. “If Doctor Wen believed it would help manage this issue, that is our best option right now.”

Lan SiZhui was quiet for a long moment, then he said: “If I go... I might never come back.”

“What else could we do?” ZeWu-Jun asked.

“I could live like a common person. Or... If the elders are willing, I’d take my guqin and go. Wei WuXian still uses his Chenqing to night-hunt. I could do the same.”

“The elders are not going to release your guqin.” ZeWu-Jun sighed heavily. “They consider creating a chamber for it in the back mountains similar to Cold Pond Cave, in an attempt to



either contain or even purge it.”

This made Lan SiZhui pause. He didn’t know the elders had such ideas.

“Didn’t Lan Yi come up with the same idea?” He asked.

“Mn.” ZeWu-Jun nodded. “And so, based on this, they’re also considering who would be able to go into such seclusion to maintain a ward.”

“Wards... They don’t require constant flow of qi, right?” Lan SiZhui asked, an idea forming in his head.

“No, not necessarily.” ZeWu-Jun shook his head. “However, a ward is only as strong as the caster. If the caster dies, so does the ward.”

“Mn. I remember now, from my studies.” Lan SiZhui hummed thoughtfully. However, then ZeWu-Jun spoke again.

“About your condition... Living like this... SiZhui, please, don’t misunderstand me.” He sighed. “I also don’t want to lose you. However, I’ve also lived through this once with... With Sect Leader Nie. He was also... He struggled with a very similar issue as well. The Nie haven’t found a solution to this either, and they had centuries to try. With *Cleansing*, his symptoms could also be managed, but even if... Even if Sect Leader Jin didn’t temper with the song, MingJue was always in danger of a fatal qi deviation. Playing *Cleansing* only delayed this, but wouldn’t cure it. Since I’m also familiar with this, how could I watch you go through the same thing as well? If there’s even a remote chance that going into seclusion in the Cold Pond Cave could help...”

He spoke haltingly, with a lot of repressed guilt and sadness. Lan SiZhui understood this now, after seeing how close Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue were in the past. To lose someone like this, it had to be devastating to ZeWu-Jun.

“In theory,” Lan SiZhui started, “My Golden Core is intact. My meridians are crushed, this, with healing meditation could be healed. The resentful energy in my Core could be cleansed by the strong positive energy of the mountains. Wen Qing’s concern was that there was too much resentful energy, and it would not be cleansed by simply the positive energy. I’d need to circulate my qi, repairing my meridians as well, which would agitate the resentful energy in my Core as well.”

“It could be done?”

“It... is not impossible, but close. If I make a mistake, I won’t have time or chance to recover.”

There was a long pause, ZeWu-Jun looking troubled. Lan SiZhui understood. His chances didn’t look good at all. Either live like this, without spiritual power, become an average person without his spiritual tool, unless the Lan Sect gave it back to him – or go into seclusion and put in a lot of effort, not knowing if it will work at all.

“I’ll leave this decision to you then.” ZeWu-Jun said quietly.

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Lan SiZhui had this idea the previous night when he spoke to ZeWu-Jun, but now, standing in front of the elders, he felt even more confident in this. He looked over them, as they looked back at him.

“Why did you request to speak with us?” ZeWu-Jun asked, kind but confused.

“ZeWu-Jun, last night when we spoke, you revealed that the elders had plans with Hudie.” At this, some elders glanced at ZeWu-Jun disapprovingly – however, they couldn’t reprimand the Sect Leader like this.

“And?” Grandmaster asked with a frown. Taking a deep breath, Lan SiZhui explained:

“Hudie is my spiritual tool. I understand the dangers it carries with the Stygian Tiger Amulet having merged with it as well. It is my responsibility, especially, since I was the one who took it into this world. I also understand some elders are reluctant to allow me back to the Sect with the things I’ve done.”

“Sect Leader, do you always give detailed reports about our discussions to the disciples?” One of the elders frowned at ZeWu-Jun. The Sect Leader huffed.

“SiZhui is my nephew, besides being the *head disciple* of the Lan Sect.” He said. “Since this concerns him greatly, I’ll not keep this a secret. SiZhui, while I understand you feel responsible, what are you trying to say?” He frowned slightly.

“ZeWu-Jun, esteemed elders, I’d like to make amends. I understand that someone needs to go into seclusion with Hudie, to contain the resentful energy.”

“SiZhui, no!” ZeWu-Jun glared at him angrily, and Grandmaster also seemed upset by the notion. However, it was one of the other elders who spoke up.

“While this is generous, Lan SiZhui, we also know about your condition.” She said. “The point of this would be to erect a ward and keep it constant until the resentful energy is cleared. We all know you’re in a fragile state now, how close you came to qi deviation since you’ve been back. However, we appreciate your offer.”

“Elder Lan, while you’re right and my condition is unstable, this can only be said if I use my spiritual energy.” He paused, then said: “Energy is just energy. Be it spiritual or different in nature, with the appropriate tools, it can be managed.”

“Where have you learned such things, insolent child?” Another elder demanded with a red face. Grandmaster also seemed mad because of this speech. Lan SiZhui ignored both their reprimands.

“This is logical. A river can split rocks, that is energy, the sun can melt ice, that is energy. We use spiritual energy to cultivate our Golden Core. This is internal energy. Who says external energy cannot be used to manipulate energy?”

“Lan SiZhui.” Grandmaster glared at him. Lan SiZhui sighed.

“The Burial Mounds is protected... Was protected by a ward specifically modified to be fed by the resentful energy inside to remain. There is only one caster needed inside who will erect the ward, then it is self-sustaining through the resentful energy it contains.”

“This is a suicide mission.” One of the elders frowned at him. Lan SiZhui nodded. At this moment, ZeWu-Jun suddenly sat in one of the chairs lined up all around the room, although the elders were not using them now. ZeWu-Jun was pale and staring at Lan SiZhui with wide eyes.

“Making amends is noble, but I did not raise you a stupid man, SiZhui.” Lan QiRen spoke up again, glaring at Lan SiZhui, addressing him with a rare informality. “I refuse, and since this is Lan SiZhui, Lan WangJi’s ward, I also advise the elders to do the same.”

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. The elders were looking at each other or elsewhere awkwardly. Then, elder Lan HuiLi, the elder who previously called him out on that wards needed spiritual energy, told Lan SiZhui:

“Please, go outside and wait until these esteemed elders discuss this.” She told him, which sounded like an order. Lan SiZhui nodded, bowing before departing.

He waited outside for a long time. A silencing talisman had been raised, but Lan SiZhui could imagine what passionate argument went on inside. He was nervously watching the entrance all afternoon, only it never opened, only way after curfew.

A very pale ZeWu-Jun stepped out, glanced at Lan SiZhui, then in an uncharacteristic way, stormed away! Lan SiZhui blinked after him. However, then Grandmaster also left, huffing at Lan SiZhui before going after his nephew. Elder Lan HuiLi came outside as well, but she stopped in front of Lan SiZhui.

“Lan SiZhui, the elders had agreed. Although, we will definitely wait a day before confirming this. ZeWu-Jun is the Sect Leader after all. He... Well, he yelled himself hoarse denying this.” She sighed. Lan SiZhui pressed his lips together, looking down.

“I’m sorry I caused trouble.”

“You knew exactly what trouble you were going to cause.” Elder Lan raised one eyebrow. “You do not fool me. This decision is yours to make, but you have a powerful family. ZeWu-Jun might be able to overrule our decision, but Hanguang-Jun can kill us all and this would be accepted because of this.”

“Ah, elder Lan, aren’t you being dramatic?” Lan SiZhui looked at her with wide eyes.

“Am I?” She huffed, looking at him with the one eyebrow still raised. Lan SiZhui blinked at her. “It is late.” She glanced up at the sky. “Well past curfew. Return to the dormitories, if you’re stopped, do tell the guard the elders approved of you returning late.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui bowed.



Lan SiZhui expected a visit from ZeWu-Jun, Hanguang-Jun, even the Grandmaster. He didn't expect one from Wei WuXian though, so when he opened the door to answer the knock, he was surprised to see the other standing there with his hands on his hips, eyebrows raised.

"Ah, brother Wei." Lan SiZhui greeted him awkwardly.

"SiZhui, do you have something pressing to do right now?"

"Um... No, not really." Lan SiZhui answered, caught off guard by the question. Wei WuXian nodded, gesturing him out of his rooms.

"Come with me then." He said, turning to leave to an unknown location. Lan SiZhui only hesitated a moment, then followed him. They went through the main buildings, and by the time Lan SiZhui realized they were going out, it was too late to stop. They left the mountain, Wei WuXian nodding to the guards at the gates. Lan SiZhui followed him down towards the forest path, leading back to Caiyi town.

"Where are we going?" Lan SiZhui asked curiously. Wei WuXian didn't answer, just kept ahead of him, so Lan SiZhui couldn't even see his expression. They went into the city, and Wei WuXian followed roads in a familiar fashion, until they arrived to a local establishment. It looked like a wine house. It had a protruding room that hung above the river there, creating a unique atmosphere. Wei WuXian brought him inside, and without talking to a waiter, went towards the part where the room hung above the water. Quickly, Lan SiZhui could already see a familiar person sitting there.

"Ah, Sect Leader Jiang." He bowed quickly. Wei WuXian pulled out a chair for him.

"Sit." He said, his face serious. Lan SiZhui hesitated, then sat across the Sect Leader. With this, Wei WuXian glanced at Jiang WanYin, then turned around and left. Just like that! Lan SiZhui was incredibly confused. He turned back to Jiang WanYin, who was frowning at him, holding his wine cup tightly.

"Uh... Sect Leader Jiang, what is going on?"

"I'd like to know that as well." Jiang WanYin answered. "Wei WuXian sent me a letter in the middle of the night, requesting me to come here, because you were 'being stupid and need to put in your place'. I don't know what the hell that means, or why I'm needed. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything." Lan SiZhui denied, shaking his head.

"You must've done something to have him call me in the middle of the night like this." Jiang WanYin huffed. "Out with it. Why am I dealing with this?"

"I... Honestly don't know."

"Well, it must've happened last night. You weren't up to anything?" Jiang WanYin frowned. "I'm Sect Leader, I don't have time for this. Just say it, whatever this is about."

“Last night... Well, we were in discussion with the Lan Sect elders. It was very upsetting to my seniors, but it truly doesn’t concern Sect Leader Jiang.”

At this, Jiang WanYin glared at him. “If I’m here for nothing, I’m leaving then.” He said, slamming his cup down. “What a waste of a morning.” He rolled his eyes, getting up. Feeling bad about wasting a Sect Leader’s time, Lan SiZhui was quick to say:

“Ah, actually, I might use your advice in this matter.” He said, thinking it through. Wei WuXian had to have a reason for this. He should share just in case. Jiang WanYin glared at him.

“Are you messing with me, kid?” He sat heavily. “Speak.”

“This discussion with the elders... Hudie, my spiritual guqin, as you know, it contains a shard of the Yin Iron.” At this, Jiang WanYin’s scowl deepened, but he remained quiet. “The elders are considering to ward it off as the previous shard had been in the Cloud Recesses. However, this needs a caster.”

At this, Jiang WanYin groaned and he held his head. Lan SiZhui quieted, curious about this reaction.

“Wei WuXian!” He called out, looking up and around, but Wei WuXian already left the establishment. Jiang WanYin scoffed, looking back at Lan SiZhui before huffing. “Don’t do it. There. Advice given.” He said, then got up.

“But...” Lan SiZhui started and at this, Jiang WanYin sat with a groan. “I’m responsible for this.”

“You are? Lan SiZhui.” Jiang WanYin glared at him. “In both times, it was Wei WuXian who created the Stygian Tiger Aulet. Let him take responsibility for his own actions for once. Who cares if you played the stupid guqin? It’s his tool.” With this, he stood again.

“I still used it and since Hudie is my spiritual tool, isn’t now the half of Stygian Tiger Amulet now mine?”

“Let me tell you this then: separate the two tools, claim your guqin, destroy the Yin Iron, live your life.” Jiang WanYin said, not bothering to sit.

“It’s not possible to separate them.” He shook his head in answer.

“Then destroy the guqin as well. It’s just a guqin. Have another made.”

“Would you say the same about Zidian?” Lan SiZhui’s gaze wandered to the spiritual tool on Jiang WanYin’s finger. It began to sparkle at this.

“Zidian is my family’s spiritual tool. It is unique. As far as I’m aware, guqin are made for you personally. You can always have another one made. And yes, I would say that about my sword.” He said, frowning. “I don’t know why I even bothered to come here.” He said, then without any parting words, he headed out.

Lan SiZhui didn't though, sat there deep in thought until someone dropped into the chair across from him. Looking up, he saw Wei WuXian with his elbows on the table, his chin resting in his intertwined hand.

"I thought since Jiang Cheng can bully sense even into Jin Ling, he can also convince you about this."

"Hudie is my spiritual tool." Lan SiZhui told him. "Even though Sect Leader Jiang says he would destroy his sword for the sake of something like this, how can that be? A spiritual tool is such because the spiritual energy of the user is fed into it, creating a bond. A piece of me is in Hudie, how could I just destroy it?"

"Is that what he said?" Wei WuXian frowned, looking over Lan SiZhui's shoulder, as if he could still call Jiang WanYin back and reprimand him. He shook his head then, looking back at Lan SiZhui. "Hudie is not the point. You think this is your responsibility, but in reality, it is not. I created the Stygian Tiger Amulet, I was even responsible for it merging with Hudie. If anyone, it should be me, going to ward it off."

"Ah, brother Wei, no, it's—"

"I'm not going to!" Wei WuXian denied quickly. "But this is also not the only way to contain the guqin. Or to deal with the resentful energy in your Core." He said, looking at Lan SiZhui strictly. "Since I've finished with the texts from the Xiu Clan, I've been thinking. The Nie Sect has a secret. Well, I wasn't meant to tell anyone this, but they're very effective in containing resentful spiritual tools. They also have the same issue with resentment in their Core. Consulting with Nie HuaiSang might be in everyone's best interest, even if I don't trust him."

Lan SiZhui was quiet for a long time, then sighed. "Do you really think they could help?"

"Yes." Wei WuXian nodded. "So would going to the Cold Pond Cave. You needn't to stay there forever, but I can see now, how strongly resentful energy affects you. This cannot go on like this. For a little while, let's go to meditate in the Cold Pond Cave. Once your state stabilized a bit, we can return and deal with this properly."

"What do you mean, you can see how strongly resentful energy affects me?" Lan SiZhui frowned.

"SiZhui, guilt is a negative emotion. Resentful energy strengthens negative emotions in the person. How can it not be that that made you chose this decision?"

"But I feel fine." Lan SiZhui shook his head. Wei WuXian huffed.

"SiZhui, I've... never spoke about this with anyone. You're the only person to know, alright? Not even Lan Zhan. You must've heard rumors about my death. How Jiang Cheng was the one to kill me? Or that resentful energy tore me apart?" At his nod, Wei WuXian continued. "Right before this, my sister, Jin Ling's mother died. She came to the battlefield because of me. Knowing I caused her death in any way, this was too much. I couldn't bare the guilt." He paused for a long time, getting lost in his memories.

“It’s not to say this wasn’t my fault or that I feel less guilty. But was I of sane mind, I wouldn’t have done what I did. Resentful energy is tricky. You don’t even notice it affecting you. Back in the village with the Wen, when I told you about how you push your friends away, that is the same. You don’t even realize it, but suddenly, your negative thoughts are so loud, they drown out everything. One moment you’re depressed, the next you’re raging.”

Lan SiZhui swallowed, familiar with what Wei WuXian was describing.

“How long will I have to stay there?” He asked quietly.

“Ah, didn’t I say already?” Wei WuXian grinned at him. “I’ll also go with you! So you won’t be alone. And so I can monitor your progress. Ah, SiZhui, did you know?” He patted his stomach. “In this body, I really have a strong Golden Core! I haven’t felt like this in so long.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“I’m glad.”

“Now, we will make you feel better too.” Wei WuXian said and stood. “Now, let’s get out of here before Jiang Cheng realizes the Wei WuXian he’s chasing to maim is just a paper puppet.” He said, leading Lan SiZhui away.

♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪

The elders readily accepted his resignation from the role of the caster and even listened attentively to Wei WuXian’s notion to consult Nie HuaiSang about this issue. They haven’t agreed to this yet, but they listened to him – without throwing him out or throwing anything heavy in his direction, which Wei WuXian later recounted as victory.

Lan SiZhui haven’t spoken to ZeWu-Jun since then, but he received a fierce look from Hanguang-Jun when he went over for tea. Thankfully, this was done without additional lecturing. Wei WuXian made plans – he said he had a few things to take care of before they go into seclusion. When Lan SiZhui told his friends about it, Jin Ling seemed relieved, Lan JingYi slightly apprehensive, but otherwise fine with this.

Soon, the day Wei WuXian set as them going into seclusion came and so they trekked up the mountain to the Cold Pond Cave’s entrance. ZeWu-Jun also came, although he would still not talk to Lan SiZhui. He didn’t seem too upset anymore, just... troubled. Lan SiZhui saw him after the events of Guanyin temple and he looked the same back then too. He really didn’t want to be the cause of this, but he didn’t know how to make it right.

Once they arrived, Lan SiZhui and Wei WuXian faced the others – their family. Lan JingYi, Jin Lin, Hanguang-Jun and ZeWu-Jun all came with them to say their goodbyes.

“Well,” Wei WuXian clapped his hands, “Who’s going to give me their forehead ribbon to let me enter?” He grinned.

“Who would want to?” Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

“You don’t even have one.” Wei WuXian pouted, then skipped over to Hanguang-Jun. “Lan Zhan! Lan Zhan! Can I borrow your ribbon?” He asked with a mischievous grin. Hanguang-Jun looked at him intensely, then huffed.

“Ridiculous.” He said, but still untied the ribbon and shyly let it fall into Wei WuXian’s hand! Lan SiZhui looked away, feeling like he was intruding on an intimate moment. His gaze settled on ZeWu-Jun, who was also watching him. There was a pause, then ZeWu-Jun inclined his head, gesturing Lan SiZhui to come to the side to talk. Once there, he sighed softly.

“SiZhui. I know I’ve acted... childish. I apologize.”

“Ah?! ZeWu-Jun, please don’t.” Lan SiZhui shook his head. “I understand completely. Instead, I apologize. I acted without thinking of others. It was not my intention to hurt anyone.” He looked down. “Although it seems that’s all I am capable of lately.”

“When we spoke the other night, I didn’t think you’d interpret it like this. It’s my fault. I just... I can’t lose more people.” He said in the end, not looking at Lan SiZhui. He sighed. “I didn’t mean to be angry with you.”

“I understand.” Lan SiZhui nodded. “I’m sorry.”

ZeWu-Jun sighed again, turning back to Lan SiZhui with a smile. “Grandmaster also sends his regards and expresses his regret that he couldn’t come to say goodbye properly.”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui nodded at this too. “It’s alright. Thanks, ZeWu-Jun.”

“SiZhui!” Wei WuXian called over, and as Lan SiZhui looked over, he saw him waving at them. “Come on!”

“Let’s go.” ZeWu-Jun also prompted and they returned to the group.

“We’ll be back soon, alright?” Wei WuXian asked, smiling at ZeWu-Jun, who nodded.

“Just go already.” Jin Ling rolled his eyes. Wei WuXian huffed at him. “SiZhui. A word.” Jin Ling said shortly, then before he could say anything, Jin Ling went over to where he was just speaking to ZeWu-Jun. Lan SiZhui sent a questioning look towards Lan JingYi, who shrugged cluelessly, so Lan SiZhui went.

“There’s something I need to say.” Jin Ling told him without waiting for Lan SiZhui to ask what was going on.

“What is it?” He prompted when the other didn’t continue.

“I’m a Jin and the Jin Sect heir, now Jin Sect Leader. I’m also an orphan. Because of this, all my life people always apologized to me and pitied me for the most insignificant things. Because of this, I always had this idea that apologies are always just empty words you throw at the other to make them feel better, but they don’t really mean much. I was also excused from a lot of my misbehavior and because of that, I haven’t really learned what it’s like to feel genuine regret towards an action of mine. I... Don’t always know when I’m really out of



line. I'm not saying this as an excuse! I'm just saying that these things, some of the things I might've done or said, they're not because I'm purposefully trying to be cruel.

"When we fought in Nightless City, I realized some things. You were always the one who took my abuse and didn't really get upset about it, so I always thought I wasn't out of line with the things I said. When JingYi isn't there to be offended on your behalf, it's hard for me to know where to draw the line; sometimes even then it's hard for me to admit I was in the wrong, because I get embarrassed easily.

"That is to say, when we fought in Nightless City and you listed all the things I was a hypocrite about, I realized while you might take the things I say, it doesn't mean I'm excused for my behavior. I said the people you met, your parents, they weren't the ones to raise you, you told me Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi weren't the ones who raised me either. Yet I held you to a higher standard because I always thought you could take more than me. Yet then I realized this wasn't true. I was too embarrassed later to say anything about it, but we're not in the past anymore, and I have a Sect to lead and responsibilities. I cannot act like this anymore.

"I know you probably already forgave me, I can see on your face you want to say it. But let me say this first, alright? Lan SiZhui." Then he bowed formally, low and proper, like Lan SiZhui rarely seen him do. "For all the things I've said and did, I apologize. I truly am sorry for hurting you without realizing it. You didn't deserve this treatment."

Lan SiZhui was speechless for several moments after this. They truly agreed, back when they were brought to the Koi Tower to apologize to each other only once they were done with their tasks and returned. However, Lan SiZhui didn't really think much about it, since he knew Jin Ling's personality, he didn't think the other would also remember and do this.

Lan SiZhui also stepped back and also bowed, as they've previously agreed.

"Jin Ling, I also apologize for all the things I've said and did. I could easily excuse my behavior by saying it was the resentful energy that brought this out of me, but the truth is, I was simply just angry with you and couldn't hold back anymore. It was never my intention to hurt you. Please, forgive me as well."

There was a tense moment, then Jin Ling huffed, then moved, tugging Lan SiZhui into a standing position as well.

"I forgive you if you forgive me, how's that?" Lan SiZhui huffed, amused as well.

"Alright."

"SiZhui, even though Wei WuXian's stupid brotherhood ceremony was improper and unofficial, I think you, me and Lan JingYi are sworn brothers regardless. Let's be allies from now on."

"Mn." Lan SiZhui smiled at him. Jin Ling nodded, then stepped back.

“What are they doing, bowing to each other like that?” They heard Wei WuXian ask from the side and sure enough, Jin Ling turned to glare at him.

“It’s none of your business! Don’t you have somewhere else to be?! You’ve embarrassed yourself enough by now. Just go.” He told him as the two of them returned.

“Jin Ling, you’re truly too mean to me!” Wei WuXian pouted.

“SiZhui, think about this. You’ll be secluded with this person for who knows how long. Wouldn’t be warding off Hudie be the better choice?” Jin Ling asked with a scoff. At this, Lan JingYi choked on apparently air.

“You—Don’t say such things!”

“How do you know?” Lan SiZhui asked with a frown. “I didn’t tell you this.”

“I do speak to my uncle sometimes!” Jin Ling exclaimed. “Or did you think you could keep it a secret?! Don’t be completely stupid.” He rolled his eyes.

“Oh.” Lan SiZhui blinked at him.

“What? Be grateful I didn’t know sooner. I’d have made my men uncover the dungeons to throw you down there for the rest of your life! This stupidity is truly criminal!”

“Ah, alright, let’s stop with the threats.” Lan JingYi scowled at him, then turned to Lan SiZhui. “Return soon, alright?”

“Mn.” Lan SiZhui smiled at him.

“Until next time then.” Jin Ling also nodded to him, then the two of them parted, so only ZeWu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun remained with them.

“I’ll ward off the entrance after you enter.” ZeWu-Jun said. “Just for safety. It will be a weak charm, you can break it by going through it.”

“Thank you, ZeWu-Jun.” Wei WuXian nodded to him. There was a tension between the two that hadn’t been there before, and Lan SiZhui wondered about that. ZeWu-Jun inclined his head and glanced at his brother.

“I’m awaiting your return. Both of yours.” He nodded to Wei WuXian, who seemed pleasantly surprised by this. ZeWu-Jun reached out and squeezed Lan SiZhui’s shoulder before stepping back. Hanguang-Jun then turned to them.

“Wei Ying, be peaceful.”

“Ah, Lan Zhan, you know I actually look forward to this! I haven’t had the chance to cultivate properly for so long, it will be great! I might even catch up with your years of advance!” He grinned at the other, who nodded approvingly, then looked to Lan SiZhui. There was a pause, then in an unexpected gesture, pulled Lan SiZhui forward into a short, but tight embrace. He let go of him shortly, then stepped back and nodded to them.

“I’ll come by every day.”

“Lan Zhan, you don’t need to!” Wei WuXian protested.

“Mn.” Hanguang-Jun hummed, not agreeing at all. Lan SiZhui nodded to him, then turned to Wei WuXian, prompting him to let them go. They entered the cave, just as cold and solemn as always. They sensed the charm being put up, then the two of them were on their own, to meditate and to heal from scars neither of them really ever healed from.

**The End.**

### Chapter End Notes

**Important:** The next two chapters are not chapters of Spring Again, but an Appendix and a Thank you note. You can find the extras in a separate work [HERE](#), or click on Next work of the Spring Again Series.

# Appendix

## Chapter Summary

**This is not a chapter of Spring Again, just the appendix.** Please refer here if you are confused at any point of the fic. Please, keep in mind that this contains spoilers.

### Worldbuilding notes :

- This fic is based on *The Untamed* - with all the drama's flaws/plot holes inherited from it. This includes them not changing actors for WWX/MXY and not masking the actors to make up for age differences, etc. (a wig change doesn't count)
- In this world/culture deception is not common, therefore there's no reason for someone to mistrust a stranger's word unless it is forementioned they're not trustworthy.
- There will be a lot of random people named in the fic. You only need to keep in mind those who have their name meanings in the notes. Name meanings will be in the chapter notes of the chapter the character first shows up, later on you can find them in the appendix.
- 13 years old: the age when disciples start their official cultivation training. When disciples turn 13 they receive their swords (those with low cultivation may choose not to carry it) and courtesy names.
- Young Master: members of the main family of a cultivation Clan/Sect.
- Junior Young Master: until the members of the main family of a cultivation Clan/Sect turn 16 they are addressed as Junior Young Masters.
- 16 years old: the age when cultivation disciples are allowed to take part in night hunts in junior groups under the supervision of a senior disciple.
- Junior groups: can have up to 8 members - more people in a group are considered excessive – of juniors between the ages 16 and 20.
- 20 years old: the age when disciples become senior disciples. From 20 years old they do not need a supervisor to night hunt, nor a group, although they can choose to night-hunt with other cultivators. Also the age Sect Leaders take over officially, until then, elders are in charge.
- Sect vs. Clan: the difference between Sects and Clans is that Sects have grown beyond only teaching the main family exclusively and accept outsiders as disciples as well. There are two types of Clans: familial and aspiring. Familial Clans are considered to be under their familial Sect's protection, sort of "part" of the Sect, like distant relatives being part of the family. Aspiring Clans wish to grow into Sects and cut ties with their familial Sect, or didn't have one to begin with. In perspective, the Su Clan was a familial Clan of the Lan Sect until Su She severed their ties and made the Su Clan an aspiring one.

### Disclaimers:

#1: I have little knowledge about the injuries mentioned in the fic.

#2: I have little knowledge about the art of war and practices of war.

#3: I am not an encyclopedia of the canon facts.

#4: This isn't a full-on canon rewrite, I took liberties.

#5: This is not a fix-it.

#6: I do not own any aspect of any of the original materials.

#7: **NOT BETA'D** I'm not a native English speaker and I speak multiple languages, my grammar is going to suck occasionally.

### **Ages:**

The ages mentioned here refer to chapter 1 of the fic (past). If you're confused how much time passes, refer to the timeline below. Some ages are irrelevant to the plot and just here for reference, some differ from canon (either because of my ignorance or on purpose) – these ages are kinda blurred over in the fic (like Jin GuangYao's for example).

- Lan SiZhui & Lan JingYi & Jiang YanLi & Lan XiChen: 19
- Wei WuXian & Lan WangJi & Wen Qing: 17
- Jin Ling & Jiang Cheng: 16
- Jin ZiXuan: 15
- Wen Ning: 14
- Nie MingJue: 23
- Jin GuangYao: ~20
- Wen ZhuLiu ~36
- Wen Chao ~21

### **Name meanings:**

Canon names/name meanings are not (all) in this, except some surnames, which are in parenthesis and their meaning is not included, please refer to other online resources if you're interested. Keep in mind these are just names, their meaning has no or little importance, just here for reference. These are only the important original characters' names, not every OCs who show up. Also, while I'm learning Chinese, I'm in no way an expert or native speaker, so in terms of the place/object/song names and titles, I might choose something stupid or use characters wrong. Oh, well, it is what it is, I'll learn.

### **Places:**

- 兰室 Lánshì: "Orchid room" - classroom
- 寒室 Hánshì: "Cold room" - Sect Leader's room
- 静室 Jìngshì: "Quiet room" - Lan WangJi's room
- 冥室 Míngshì: "Underworld room" - watchtower where spirits are summoned

- 雅室 Yǎshì: "Elegant room" - waiting room for important guests (could probably function as a bedroom as well)
- **Mountains of Cloud Recesses:**
- 黎明 Lí míng: "dawn"
- 早上 Zǎoshang: "morning"
- 正午 Zhèngwǔ: "midday"
- 下午 Xiàwǔ: "afternoon"
- 晚間 Wǎnjiān: "evening"
- 午夜 Wǔyè: "midnight"

### Names:

- Lan JingYi's birthname: (藍)程 (Lán) Chéng: "surname/rule/order/regulations"
- Lan JingYi's father: (藍)晨光 (Lán) ChénGuāng: "morning light"
- Lan JingYi's mother: (苏)捉諤 (Sū) ZhuōXuān: Zhuō: "to grab" Xuān: "surname/clever/intelligent"
- Jin Ling's "father's" name (by LSZ in Ch2&3): (金)俗(軒) (Jīn) Sù(Xuān): "vulgar/custom/common"
- Jiang doctor: 话轻 Huà Qīng: Huà: "dialect; language/spoken words" Qīng: "light/easy/gentle"
- Lan SiZhui's uncle: (溫)蝉于 (Wēn) ChánYú: Chán: "cicada" Yú: "surname/to go/to take"
- Lan SiZhui's father (birthname): (溫)新 (Wēn) Xīn: "new"
- Lan SiZhui's father (courtesy): (溫)晓强 (Wēn) XiǎoQiáng: Xiǎo: "dawn" Qiáng: "surname/strong/powerful"
- Lan SiZhui's mother: 豪易费 Háo YìFèi: Háo: "heroic" Yì: "surname/easy" Fèi: "surname/to spend"
- Jin guard: 力星旭 Lì XīngXù: Lì: "surname/power/force" Xīng: "star" Xù: "dawn"

### Weapons:

- Lan JingYi's sword: 蚱蜢 Zhà mǐng: "grasshopper"
- Lan SiZhui's sword: 营救 Yíngjiù: "to save/to rescue"
- Lan SiZhui's guqin: 蝴蝶 Húdié: "butterfly"
- Jin Ling's sword: 仙子 Xiānzǐ: "Fairy"
- Jin Ling's bow: 黄蜂 Huángfēng: "wasp"
- Wen sword: 廢墟 Fèixū: "ruins"
- Lan JingYi's family sword: 晴天 QíngTiān: "clear sky"

### Titles:

- Jin Ling: 谋士 MóuShì: "counselor/tactician/strategist/skilled manipulator"
- Lan SiZhui: 春雨(君) Chūnyǔ(-Jūn): "spring rain/gift from above"
- Lan JingYi: 鳳刺客 Fèng CìKè: Fèng: "Phoenix" CìKè: "assassin/murderer"

## Songs:

- Spring Again: 又是春天 Yòu Shì Chūn Tiān: Yòu: "(once) again; also" Shì: "is; are; am; yes; to be" Chūn Tiān: "spring (season)"
- Song of Winter: 冬天的歌 Dōng Tiān De Gē: Dōng Tiān: "winter" De: "possessive particle" Gē: "song"
- Death of Autumn: 秋天的死亡 Qiū Tiān De Sǐ Wáng: Qiū Tiān: "autumn" De: "possessive particle" Sǐ Wáng: "death"
- Beauty of Summer: 夏天的美丽 Xià Tiān De Měi Lì: Xià Tiān: "summer" De: "possessive particle" Měi Lì: "beautiful, beauty"

## Timeline:

### Year 1:

- **Chapter 1-6 – GusuLan guest lectures (~2,5 months – June, July, August)**
  - Chapter 1-2 – Not realizing they're in the past
  - Chapter 3-4 – Discussing what to do/punishments
  - Chapter 5-6 – Looking for the Yin Iron, Cloud Recesses/aqua demon
- **Chapter 7 – Looking for the Yin Iron, Yiling (~1 month – August, September)**
- **Chapter 8-10 – Wen indoctrination (~1 month – September, October)**
  - Chapter 8 – Battle of Cloud Recesses/being taken to the indoctrination office
  - Chapter 9 – Indoctrination
  - Chapter 10 – Xuanwu cave
- **Chapter 11 – Reclaiming of Cloud Recesses (a little less than a month – October, maybe a bit November)**
- **Chapter 12-14 – Attack on Lotus Pier and aftermath (~1 month – November, a tiny bit December)**
  - Chapter 12 – Attack on Lotus Pier
  - Chapter 13 – YiLing supervisory office
  - Chapter 14 – Escape from YiLing/confrontation with Wen Chao
- **Chapter 15-16 – Burial Mounds via Wen Chao (~3 months – December, January, February)**
- **Chapter 17-21 – Sunshot Campaign (including Ch.22-25 as well: ~5,5 months – March, April, May, June, July, maybe a bit August)**
  - Chapter 17-18 – Wen Chao's capture, Lotus Pier
  - Chapter 19 – Wen Chao's capture, Cloud Recesses/war discussions
  - Chapter 20-21 – Saving the Wen siblings/healing in war camp

### Year 2:

- **Chapter 22-25 – Sunshot Campaign (including Ch.17-21 as well: ~5,5 months – March, April, May, June, July, maybe a bit August)**
  - Chapter 22 – Sunshot Campaign montage/Wen Xu's defeat/One year anniversary
  - Chapter 23-25 – Last battle in Nightless City/defeating Wen ZhuLiu/defeating Wen Chao/defeating Wen RuoHan
- **Chapter 26-28 – Nightless City Conference no.1 (a week at most)**
  - Chapter 26 – First day of the Conference, celebrating the heroes

- Chapter 27 – Second day of the Conference, discussing issues regarding the war
- Chapter 28 – Looking through books/preparing to leave/leaving
- **Chapter 29 – Return to Cloud Recesses (a little over a month – August, September)**
- **Chapter 30-31 – Wen village (a little over a month – September, October)**
- **Chapter 32-34 – Crowd Hunt (less than a month – October, November maybe)**
  - Chapter 32-33 – LSZ in Jin capture
  - Chapter 34 – Crowd Hunt fight/heading to Qiongqi
- **Chapter 35 – Qiongqi (just a day)**
- **Chapter 36-40 – Burial Mounds via Lan SiZhui (~2,5 months – November, December, January)**
  - Chapter 36-37 – arriving and establishing a settlement
  - Chapter 38 – WWX & LWJ arrive
  - Chapter 39-40 – Burial Mounds siege, discussion and fight
- **Chapter 41-43 – Village outside Qishan (~1 month – January, February)**
- **Chapter 44-45 – Nightless City Conference no.2 (just a day)**
- **Chapter 46-49 – Koi Tower (~4 months – February, March, April, May)**
  - Chapter 46 – Arriving, first punishment
  - Chapter 47 – Revelation of Wang LingJiao and Wen Xu/Wen Xu's death/JGY visits/second punishment (Nie demand)
  - Chapter 48 – Resentful energy rising/third punishment (Yao & Su demand)/Wang LingJiao's death/LXC's visit
  - Chapter 49 – Freeing LSZ
- **Chapter 50-52 – Moling (~two weeks)**
- **Chapter 53-55 – Cloud Recesses (~1,5 months – June, July)**
  - Chapter 53 – Arriving, discussing
  - Chapter 54 – Research
  - Chapter 55 – WWX arrives/Death of Autumn discovered/attempt at spell/returning to the future
- **Chapter 55-57 – Future**

### **Future's timeline:**

Year 1:

- JL & LJY & LSZ go missing
- Investigating (~3 months)
- JC & LXC try to lead the Jin, LWJ & WWX work on the disappearance (~3 months)
- Jin Sect Conference (we don't know how long this took)
- WWX becomes the acting Jin Sect Leader (~2 months)
- They figure out Spring Again
- WWX & JC & LXC lead the Jin Sect while LWJ investigates Spring Again (~3 months)

Year 2:



- WWX continues leading the Jin Sect, LWJ & him try to return (~9 months)
- WWX returns to the past (this is at Ch.41 of Spring Again)
- JC & LXC & LWJ keep living life as is, though they're all anxious to get everyone back (~7 months)
- JL & LJY & LSZ return

# Thank You

## Chapter Summary

**This is not a chapter of Spring Again, just a thank you note.**

Dear Readers (capitalized, because you deserve it)!

From the bottom of my heart thank you for reading my waaaaay too long fanfiction, Spring Again.

Here's the thing: it is quite usual for me to begin writing long-ass fics when I get inspired by something, but then I lose momentum and never finish these fics. I could post about a million words worth of fanfics of various fandoms from abandoned fics only. This isn't unique to me, but I wanted to include this info because SA pretty much started out the same. I wrote 100k in two months in August and September of 2020 and then I lost momentum. However, when I was about to put it into my abandoned fic folder, something stopped me, and instead I posted the first chapter. Why? Cuz I was stupid. Seriously, what was I thinking, with my way of only writing when I get inspired and that could be years in between writing sessions?

Anyways.

Despite my frustration with myself for posting it pretty much prematurely, I decided to commit to it. I've done this before, posted WIPs, but I never stuck to it and deleted them. I've decided not to do that this time, and look at this. Fucking 600k+ and 3 years of writing. And I did it. Well, now I know I'm capable of it and also that I'm certainly never doing this again. :D

When I get inspired, I have a thought and write it down real quick, so I'd like to share my first notes from when I got inspired to write SA, because at this point, it's a fucking relic.

*“juniors go back to the past to experience what it was like to fight a war and all that*

*oyzz yesorno?? probably no, I wouldnt know what to do w him*

*jin ling is some kind of legolas using spiritual energy in his bow*

*lan sizhui discovers qin language can manipulate spiritual energy > follows in his fathers' footsteps and controls puppets but not like with clarity and shit but actually giving them commands like the yiling patriarch did – lets make him badass ,l,,l*

*lan jingyi is ... there. lan jingyi talisman master???”*

Alright, enough about me. This is a thank you note. So.

For me to be able to finish SA, I cannot deny how big of a role you all had in it. (Like I was going to do this out of sheer will!! You don't know how little effort I can put into things if I don't feel like it matters to anyone but me.) Listen, as I said, I've tried posting WIPs before, but I never stuck with them. But you guys... You made theories and made me think about what direction to take the fic, so I was constantly stimulated to figure out new ideas and that helped so much! Some of you even inspired entire plotlines!! It's actually pretty wild.

Oh, don't worry, not only those get credit who brainstormed here. Your encouragement and love for SA really motivated me and even when I was sick and tired of writing this fic (which was more often than you'd think) I pushed through because I was just so excited to see your reactions to the certain events. Just a comment "Oh, shit" was like, "Hell yeah, they got emotions because of SA!!" I'm very grateful for all your support!!

Since I started writing this fic, I got a new job – the best I had so far – I had a concussion, a very dear and close family member of mine died (hence the year-long pause, sorry again!), my second nephew was born, and my life literally turned around. I'm very happy to have gone through all this with Spring Again and by extension you all.

You are the best readers ever. Get some sleep, I know I fucking will.

Saori

## End Notes

If you'd like to read the extras, please click on Next work on Spring Again series, or follow [this link](#).

Here's my [tumblr](#) if you wanna say hi, and if you liked the fic, please consider [reblogging this artwork](#) to share it with others!

Thank you for reading! Comments\* and kudos are always welcome and appreciated.

\*If you only wish to point out mistakes and not comment on the actual plot, please send those to my tumblr as an ask via [ssaori.tumblr.com/ask](https://ssaori.tumblr.com/ask). I greatly appreciate you keeping the comment section for the story discussion only!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!